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Undoing the world together: feminist facilitation as play, care, and revolt

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the workshopped practices of Hybrid Women, a transnational feminist performance collective working between the UK and Italy, through Sheila Preston's notion of critical facilitation. We argue that Hybrid Women's workshops function as laboratories of feminist praxis in which facilitation is enacted as a relational, performative, and politically implicated practice, rather than a neutral technique. Framed through the metaphor of carnival as a *c/littoral zone* – a tidal, porous space of becoming – the paper explores how play, risk, and care are mobilized to unsettle fixed identities, pedagogical hierarchies, and neoliberal demands for coherence and outcomes. Drawing on four main works by Hybrid Women, *Building a Boat for Tempestuous Times*, *Songs of Sirens not Semen*, *C/littoral Fleure* (all 2023), and *Dirty Places-Clean Spaces* (2025), the article foregrounds workshopping as a mode of collective enquiry that stays with contradiction, discomfort, and excess.

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Multimodal arts; critical facilitation; feminist pedagogy; relational practice; embodied knowledge

This article examines the workshopped practices of Hybrid Women, a transnational feminist collective working between the UK and Italy. Hybrid Women's name originated through our generative relational processes that bridge digital and live engagements and the desire to become *more than* our individual selves through collective encounter and play. This stance informs our approaches, underpinned by a feminist ethics of care¹ and collaboration, mixing artistic experimentation with critical pedagogical frameworks.² Through long-term, relational processes, our work creates spaces for deep encounter, shared meaning-making, and embodied forms of knowledge production across disciplinary and national borders.

Our pedagogic performance practices are framed through Sheila Preston's notion of critical facilitation.³ Hybrid Women's workshops function as laboratories of co-facilitated selves, where knowledge is produced through embodied encounter rather than transmission.⁴ This means that our way of facilitating workshops is to do with non-directive learning and improvisation within light-touch guidance. Indeed, we use our own shifting identities as individuals, embodied within our collective amorphous 'hybrid woman' identity, as a resource that informs our distinct and evolving feminist praxis. This praxis is a relational and pedagogic framework within which we invite fellow researchers, participants, artists. In each iterative workshop, collaborators are subsumed and co-merge with us as co-facilitators. From this *insider position*, collaborators take forward, challenge, adopt, replicate or deny our facilitation processes.

Preston positions facilitation not as a neutral technique or transferable skill set, but as a culturally situated, relational and political practice. She resists instrumental or moralizing models of facilitation, as well as judgements around good or bad practice, arguing instead for an approach that attends to 'what is done *relationally* – in context, between people, and against a socio-political backdrop'.⁵ From this perspective, facilitation always implicates power relations, social-emotional-psychological regimes and cultural his (her/their) stories that precede and exceed any single workshop encounter. It favours a dialectical attention to contradiction, context and process. This positioning is foundational to Hybrid Women's feminist praxis. Our facilitation practices do not seek to resolve contradiction, produce consensus or deliver predetermined outcomes. Rather, they operate within what Preston identifies as paradoxes of facilitation,⁶ where intention and impact are not aligned, and where every

facilitative choice may simultaneously enable and disable. We treat this condition not as failure but as a productive feminist terrain. Facilitation is thus understood as a form of critical enquiry, requiring ongoing self-reflexivity and attention to one's own assumptions, values and ideological limitations. Celia Hunt describes this attentiveness as a form of emotional cognition, 'a mechanism that enables knowledge of the world and of oneself to be acquired through a relaxed kind of intentionality operating intuitively at a low-level of consciousness but giving rise to conscious reflection and action'.⁷

Also, central to our framework/s is Preston's insistence that facilitation cannot be separated from its cultural and emotional context. The facilitator does not stand outside the work as an impartial guide; rather, 'we are implicated before we even enter the room'.⁸ Hybrid Women explicitly foreground this implication, refusing the fantasy of facilitator neutrality. Facilitation is enacted as cultural work, in which practitioners and participants are mutually entangled within the same social, affective and symbolic processes, albeit with different responsibilities. This shared implication underpins our commitment to co-facilitation, vulnerability and presence as ethical feminist strategies rather than stylistic choices.

Preston further situates facilitation within dilemmatic spaces, which she frames as contexts shaped by competing agendas, institutional pressures, neoliberal demands for outcomes, and the emotional labour of working with difference. In such spaces, facilitators are often required to act for their own perception of best for the whole group, where there is no obvious right thing to do. Rather than framing these dilemmas as individual shortcomings or ethical failures, Preston locates them within wider social and political contradictions.⁹ Hybrid Women's work inhabits these dilemmatic conditions deliberately, resisting the drive towards certainty or closure. Our practices privilege responsiveness over prescription, recognizing that feminist facilitation often involves staying with uncertainty rather than resolving it. This commitment follows Preston's articulation of resilient facilitation, understood not as endurance or coping, but as a politically informed capacity to remain present within discomfort. Resilience, for Preston, involves the ability to exist in the 'complexity, messiness, and difficulty' of moments,¹⁰ to acknowledge this and work with such uncertainty and ambiguity. Hybrid Women extend this stance through the metaphor of risky play¹¹ as a *c/littoral* zone (our term), a tidal, porous space of becoming where identities, roles and pedagogical hierarchies are temporarily undone and remade. In this zone, facilitators and participants co-navigate moments of excess, refusal and transformation together. Risky play functions here not as spectacle but as pedagogy, an embodied, relational practice that holds ambivalence without demanding resolution.

Preston's attention to what Arlie Hochschild calls 'regimes of emotion' is equally significant, since facilitation is shaped by socially produced 'feeling rules'¹² that govern which emotions are permissible, visible or suppressed in educational and participatory contexts. Hybrid Women's feminist facilitation actively disrupts these regimes by legitimizing emotions often marginalized within institutional pedagogies, such as ambivalence, eroticism, humour, anger, grief and pleasure. Rather than containing or correcting affect, our practices treat emotional responses as culturally and politically meaningful and transformative, aligning with Preston's assertion that emotions must be read socially rather than individualized. Finally, Preston cautions against facilitation that collapses into end-gaming or moral correction, where premature intervention forecloses emergent possibilities. She advocates instead for the courage to stay in the mess and resist the impulse to tidy complexity into coherence. Hybrid Women enact this through facilitation strategies grounded in improvisation, embodied response and collective sense-making. Facilitation becomes a practice of performative reading, attentively 'noticing'¹³ what is said and unsaid, felt and enacted, and responding multi-modally, without foreclosing meaning.

Context

The discussions that follow do not present four artworks as illustrative case studies that 'apply' theory to practice. Instead, 1) *Building a Boat for Tempestuous Times*, 2) *Songs of Sirens not Semen*, 3) *C/littorial Fleure* (all 2023) and 4) *Dirty Places–Clean Spaces* (2025) are offered as situated enactments of critical facilitation. Each emerges from a distinct cultural, social and relational context. In 1) the communal memory of *m/o/thering* is interrogated, in 2) we slip between the gendered heteronormative city and 3) the fluid seashore, and in 4) we address the feminized domestic interior as a site of carnival. Each foregrounds the politics of the process rather than the outcome. Together, they demonstrate how critical facilitation operates as



Figure 1. *What's She Doing Now?* Bell & Sossi as Alice + White, 2023 photo credit: Sian Kirman-Wright.

feminist praxis: relational, dilemmatic, emotionally charged, and resistant to capture. Facilitation unfolds within each work, staying with contradiction, excess and care as modes of feminist revolt.

All four Hybrid Women had worked with each other in various guises before the collective was formed. Alice and Marina, through the artistic partnership Alice + White, produced the initial collaborative multimodal installation *Tearing* (2022), developed in pedagogic interplay with MA Fine Art and Performing Arts students, staff and PhD researchers at the University of Lincoln.

This work germinated a series of further queries towards the next project, *What's She Doing Now?* (2023, see [Figure 1](#)). In this, Alice + White continued expanding their critical co-facilitation processes by inviting a wide range of women in their networks to respond multimodally to the above question. Participants' responses acted as a critical window into Alice + White's daily lives, both real and imagined. We processed the material gathered from at least 60 female participants, aged 18–80, looking for common themes, images, symbols and words, and attempted to draw out a central thread that could hold it all. We discussed this and responded intuitively in the space.

Tearing (2022) and *What's She Doing Now?* (2023), plus earlier collaborations between Bell and Del Negro (2018, see *TETTT*, [Figure 2](#)) and Del Negro and Luraschi (2021, see *Ospitare/Hosting others*, [Figure 3](#)) stimulated the first experimental coming together of the four of us as Hybrid Women (2023) in an initial online encounter. The potency of our former materials encouraged this, and it was important that our proposed collaboration would be co-created from its inception.

Building a Boat for Tempestuous Times

In *Building a Boat for Tempestuous Times* (2023), our pedagogic and performative foundations coalesced, and our critical and creative praxis became further shaped through each other. Through our multimodal off-line engagements and subsequent online sharing of these, we became each other's tools and processes of critical co-facilitation. Specifically, our methods of exchange enabled each other to embody the m/other, sister, daughter archetypes, understood not as fixed roles but as fluid psychic aspects that may be lived simultaneously,¹⁴ playfully, painfully, pleurably. As Hélène Cixous says, we,



Figure 2. *Transformational encounters touch, traction, transform (TETTT)*, *TETTT participant videos* Society Research into Adult Education (ESREA) life narratives, Bell & Del Negro, 2018, photo credit: Stewart Bell.



Figure 3. *Ospitare/Hosting others*, *Experiential Translation* Del Negro & Luraschi, 2021 photo credit: Gaia Bonanomi.

too, overflow; my [our] desires have invented new desires, my [our] body knows unheard-of songs. Time and again I [we], too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I [we] could burst-burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a fortune.¹⁵

Through our entangled intersubjective processes, we unearthed, usurped and challenged deeply rooted cultural, psycho-sociological and gendered mapping. This was scaffolded through a Participatory Practice-based Framework developed by Bell in 2021 in *TETTT* (Bell, *A New Framework*, see Figure 2 and 4), within which Del Negro was a participant. Formerly used as a way for Bell in *TETTT* to work with 12 participants as a facilitator-practitioner from the power position of 'leader', in *Building a Boat for Tempestuous Times* we were each equal facilitators. As a way of attempting to democratizing power relationships between us all, as women, academics, artists, we workshopped each other through the exchange of creative artefacts.

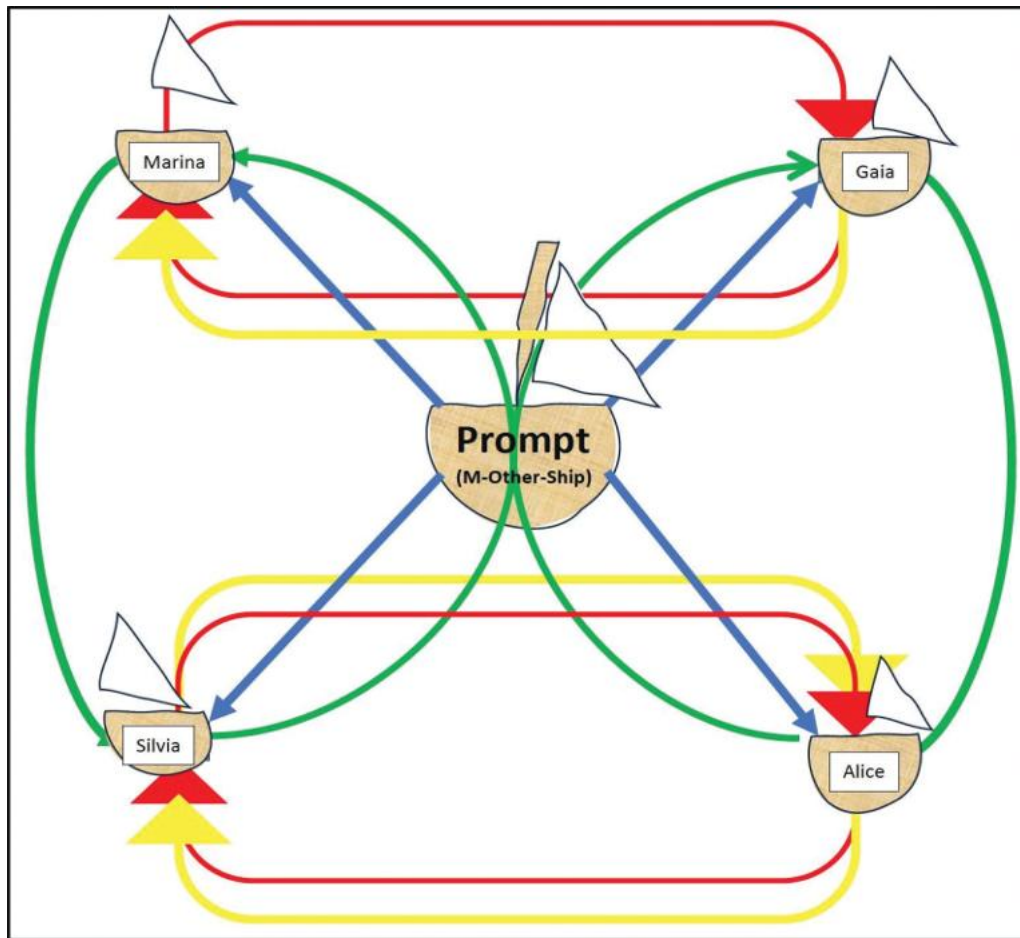


Figure 4. Participatory Practice-based (part-pb) Framework, Bell (2021), *Part-pb Framework in Action* used in.

Our central prompt from the ‘M-Other-Ship’ was to generate a creative response to the theme of ‘Mother Made’ that had emerged from our initial online creative conversation.

These creative artefacts then followed through each other iteratively and generatively (see the direction of travel colour flows on [Figure 4](#)), forming the ‘Hybrid Woman’ that we now are collectively. Our responses were gifts to each other, caring interactions rooted in the act of co-m(o)thering the birth of the hybrid us.¹⁶ In alignment with the principles of critical facilitation, we chose not to have a set outcome or goal, or destination for this process, but rather to focus on the emergent experience of workshoping each other. This was a feminist pedagogic approach that honoured and investigated each other carefully, critically and creatively. Indeed, feminist pedagogies, as observed by Sanford et al.,¹⁷ employ nonformal education and informal learning strategies to encourage new knowledge and challenge learned assumptions. This immediately invited a more intimate and entangled engagement and discoveries. This is the process that formed our bond and carried us forward on our ‘Boat’ with the enduring enquiry, ‘What is care and how do we take care in the creative act?’

Songs of Sirens not Semen and C/littorial Fleure

The only time we, Hybrid Women, got together in person was in the autumn of 2023 in Croatia. Unfortunately, the Artfulness conference, organized by the University of Zagreb in Opatja, was turned into an online event at the last minute, so we organized ourselves to facilitate a workshop called *Songs of Sirens not Semen* from the living room of a shared flat we had booked to deliberately co-habit months earlier. Being together for the first time gave us the opportunity to understand the meaning of our work as artists, academics, researchers and social workers in a live embodied, rather than online mediated, co-

habitation. Looking back today at the notes we made in preparation for our workshop, we can see in hindsight the meaning of our commitment to care and revolt:

This is the first time we have all met in-person together. Before, our process was all online. In this moment of history [when] borders are very strong, we want to be part of a trans-national group. With the UK, now outside Europe, with closed borders to immigrants, our desire to work together is for a more ecological experience of social community and co-learning. We work with adults in education, enabling deep encounter through multimodal arts practices, spiritual, somatic, and playful. We inhabit relational spaces, wherein processes of unlearning, becoming and emancipation occur co-affectively.¹⁸

Workshop Instructions: Songs of Sirens not Semen (Figure 5 below)

Welcome!

We are Hybrid Women, a feminine, fierce, feeling collective.

In this workshop we ask you to pick a (M)other made object, something your Mother made for you.

Step 1: Write a short description of the object in the chat.

For example: 'a blue jumper my Mother made for me when I was 12'

Step 2: Make a personal multimodal translation of the object, for example create a story about the object, a drawing of the object, a collage, a photo, a video.



Figure 5. Hybrid Women, facilitating the workshop *Songs of Sirens not Semen* online during the artfulness conference (Croatia), 2023, from our co-habitation space. Photo credit: Silvia Luraschi.

Step 3: Show and share your translation of the object in the group. The sharer enters the conversation by resonance with the previous shares. The group exercises listening without interruption. The hybrid inter-subjective inter-generational (M)other vessel is built . . .

For ‘Artfulness’, we facilitated the hybrid living and virtual workshop *Songs of Sirens not Semen*, through which we shared our co-created practice bringing awareness to the sensitivities and needs of others whilst living communally. By honouring the complexity of the collective experience, we enabled more than twenty participants (artists and academics) to transmute their own stories art-fully and care-fully into something more powerful, beautiful, owned. Our kind rebelliousness invited others to challenge their own assumptions (as we had done in *Building a Boat for Tempestuous Times*), and that which was no longer ‘of service’ was revealed, resourcing participants as co-creators, with richer pedagogies for life. In our laboratory practice, a participant revealed the figure of the mother as a two-tailed mermaid – half woman, half bird or fish – evoking a transhistorical lineage from ancient Mother Earth figures and Classical Sirens to the medieval melusine, where maternity, hybridity and transformation converge.¹⁹ The two-tailed mermaid represented for her the mother who opened her womb to give birth to humankind, but at the same time a contradictory symbol, a hybrid being with a body that evokes a transformation in progress and never completed. During the facilitation of the online workshop, to engage participants in using any materials available in their space to create an artefact, we also playfully donned four yellow blankets we found in the flat. This amused us and provoked a participant to tell a tale of the Selkies, mythic seal beings capable of shifting between human and animal form through the removal or recovery of their skins, appearing on land to dance at the threshold of sea and shore. This story sparked our desire to leave the flat and to encounter the seashore wearing our blankets.

We took the car and walked for about twenty minutes through the brambles and cliffs, each of us clutching our blankets, to reach a fishing beach. There on the beach, looking at the jagged coastline that forms the bay in which Opatija is located, we felt like we were inside a vagina. From this sensory experience of somatic awareness and spiritual presence, we improvised and filmed the performance *C/littorial Fleure* (Figure 6).

This video performance sees bodies slowly emerge like butterfly larvae from cocoon blankets that flow out into the landscape. Improvised spontaneously in response to each other, a mutual unveiling and revelation, the bodies entwine and connect until unexpectedly one of us disappears into the water and re-emerges a red mermaid. Luraschi likened her experience of this to the words of Italian poet Anna Segre’s *Onora tua figlia*, [Honour your Daughter] 2025,²⁰ in Italian with English translation below,



Figure 6. Hybrid Women, *C/littorial Fleure*, *C/Littorial Fleure Video*, 2023, photo credit: hybrid Women.

Dirty Places–Clean Spaces

In 2025 and in response to the call of the International Federation for Theatre Research conference ‘Performing Carnival: Ekstasis, Subversion, Metamorphosis’, at the University of Cologne, we started to re-interrogate our processes through the thematic lens of carnival. Our way to prepare new work is to co-facilitate an embodied creative process within and between ourselves.²¹ We deal with what happens.

Dice che prima di parlare il bambino canta. Che prima di camminare danza. Prima di scrivere disegna.	She says that before speaking, the child sings. That before walking, she dances. Before writing, she draws.
Prima l'arte della mediazione. L'arte subito immediatamente.	First, the art of meditation, the art immediately, right away.
Poi sfarinati nella cognizione, disfatti nella norma del linguaggio, cerchiamo l'altro da noi perdendo la scintilla divina.	Then, crumbling in cognition, undone in the norm of language, we seek the other from ourselves, losing our divine spark.

Considering ‘the plurality of identifications and subject positions that can exist in a room and the difficult choices that a facilitator [or facilitators] may need to make in moving the work forward’,²² it is essential for us to workshop our materials co-creatively. During a Zoom call, we started to silently but simultaneously type ideas, first in the chat and then in our WhatsApp group, as a textual brainstorming. What interests us in carnival? We wrote quickly, responding to each other with questions, expansions, diversions, reactions, and then selected three themes as categories of analysis:

- (1) Body – What sensory elements (sound, movement, costume, ritual) heighten the experience of the c/ littoral zone?
- (2) Play – How can we play with thresholds – between visibility/invisibility, containment/excess, structure/chaos?
- (3) Public – What material interventions (installations, participatory rituals, scenographic choices) might amplify the artwork’s impact?

For our next online meeting in three weeks’ time, we gave ourselves the task of intervening in the text to select words and images based on resonance and of entering a ‘dialogue with the images’²³ that arose from the highlighted/circled words/themes/sensations through the ‘making’ of something. Each of us engaged in individual research, not knowing what we would find. When we presented our findings to each other, we discussed how the artworks spoke to us, telling personal and professional stories. We wrote short reflections about women’s condition as cleaning ladies in patriarchal culture, care, and subverting these expectations and roles to explore freedom. Exploration is not safe. Freedom is relational. It is always emerging and never fixed. We can only transform when we encounter our fears and desires and speak to one another.²⁴

Del Negro told us a story of an experience that had occurred to her in the three-week interim about making jokes with her very old Grandma in an elderly home bed. That was an irreverent and joyful way for her to say *goodbye*, and *I love you*, and for her Grandma to ask *can I now die*, and for Gaia to answer *yes you can* and *thank you for everything*. This was a very moving story for the rest of us to hear and receive, (Figure 7 below).

In a global context where much institutional discourse, within universities, community organizations, and activist spaces, is preoccupied with the creation of safe spaces – with the elimination of what is different,²⁵ our facilitation aims to rethink safety and embrace the politics of risk. We feel closer to the idea that we need to engage in relational creative work to continuously negotiate confidence and wellbeing. Safe feeling can be cultivated, but ‘a safe space is never completely safe’.²⁶ So, rather than resolving dilemmas of safety (given that social dilemmas cannot be solved without anesthetising lives and trivializing meanings),²⁷ Hybrid Women cultivate ‘safe-enough’²⁸ spaces of shared risk, where affect, humour, grief, and pleasure are treated as culturally and politically meaningful.

The emerging theme of our carnival research thus became Dust, likened to *la petite mort*, the brief loss or weakening of consciousness (the residue/remains) after both orgasm (life) and in body (death). In this, we



Figure 7. *I love you so much and now I can die*, Siena and Gaia (2025) photo credit: Daniela Mongiardini.

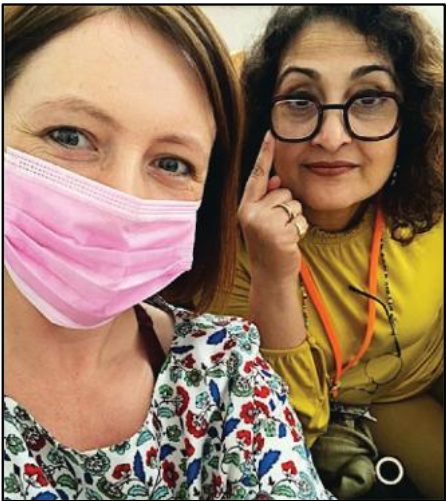
Mosquito man and elephant man Sea mask, you can hide in the sea, refuge underwater, shut everything out Something that invites you to approach We wear masks even when we do not wear masks If you can't understand it - it does not touch you Let's exchange lenses, let's see how we see visually, covid mask but pink, a pair of someone else's spectacles. [Collective list of participant's written responses]	 
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Figure 8. *Hybrid Women, Dirty Places, Clean Spaces*, participant feedback (2025), photo credit: Alice Bell.



Figure 9. Hybrid Women, *Dirty Places*, *Clean spaces*, constituting Cologne (2025) photo credit: Alice Bell.



Figure 10. Hybrid Women, *Dirty Places*, *Clean spaces*, constituting Cologne. (2025), photo credit: Alice Bell.

were interested in fears of abandonment (loss) and joys of ecstasy (uncontainable), where safety is negotiated and redefined in such relational moments. Through this, the idea for *Dirty Places*, *Clean Spaces* (2025) emerged.

For our hybrid and interactive conference presentation (Bell in the room, Del Negro and Luraschi on live feed and Sossi pre-recorded), we decided to present our musings on *Dirty Places*, *Clean Spaces* as a lens to carnival and invite playful actions in the liminal space of masks, faces, identities, and dust. Richard Schechner and Victor Turner remind us, in their various works on liminality, that a transformative event resists commodification and control,²⁹ and that a ‘ritual process [such as carnival] opens up a time/space of anti-structural playfulness, the liminoid within the liminal’.³⁰ Our own practices consciously embrace this liminality, fleetingness, improvisation, embodied response, and relational

Conclusion

Central to our exploration was the notion of identity as fluid, plural, and trans-individual, resisting fixed categorizations across genders and roles. The participants in our interactive presentation in Cologne, were invited to think of a mask they would wear on carnival, exchange one item of clothing or an accessory with another person and put it on in a typical or unusual way to express their new identity/ies together, (Figure 8).

As a final action, Bell opened envelopes in the live environment, containing dust from our respective homes in Italy and the UK (see Figure 9).

She showed it to the participants, and after the conference filmed herself scattering the Hybrid Women's body of mixed dust as a subversive and risky act in the city of Cologne, (Figure 10, below).

Through the lens of Preston's critical facilitation, this article has framed our feminist facilitation as a performative, relational, and insurgent practice that unfolds through play, risk, and collective workshoping rather than technique, transmission, or resolution. Across Hybrid Women's practices, our facilitation is enacted as an ongoing rehearsal of contradiction, where discomfort, excess, humour, grief, and pleasure are not managed away but activated as political and pedagogical forces. Our articulation of our processes as a c/littoral zone names a tidal space of becoming in which roles, identities, and hierarchies are undone through embodied play and remade through relational encounter. Here, facilitation precedes mediation, as the poet Segre suggested above, before language stabilizes meaning, there is singing, dancing, drawing, art enacted immediately, prior to normativity and capture. In our approach, workshoping becomes a feminist mode of revolt, a collective practice of staying-with, improvising-with, and thinking-through messiness, refusing neoliberal demands for coherence, outcomes, and safety-as-containment. By cultivating 'safe-enough' spaces, Hybrid Women position facilitation as a form of care that is not soothing but transformative. Rather than offering models to be replicated, this work insists on critical facilitation as praxis, situated, dilemmatic, and resistant, where play is method, care is political, and revolt is practiced together, through the doing.

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Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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