

# Agitating Towards Flourishing: Fermentation Intelligences in Para-Pedagogical Practice

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## Abstract

This paper positions the para-pedagogical as a liberatory practice and theoretical orientation of ‘learning beside’. It seeks to liberate pedagogy from the contextualising of objects and artefacts through the reimagining of learning, people and more-than-human bodies and energies as material. Building on a shared interest in interrogating how learning moves through mainstream education, the para-pedagogical in this context situates the work in direct relation with the gallery and museum sector rather than the university. Drawing from embodied research across diverse geographies and institutional contexts, it argues for fermentation as a methodological lens, articulated through a set of ‘fermentation intelligences’ that make para-pedagogical work possible. These intelligences—contamination, queer temporalities, interspecies kinship, agitating towards stability, and preserving and transforming—animate pedagogy as a site of relational learning, institutional reimagining, and sovereignty through the position of the beside. By shifting focus from outcomes to conditions, the paper repositions pedagogy as central, not to contextualise objects, artists, or exhibitions, but as a critical, sovereign force in its own right. It contributes to emerging discourses on para-institutionalism and pedagogical sovereignty, proposing new vocabularies and infrastructures through which institutions might re-world themselves amidst cultural and ecological precarity. This is not a model to scale, but a method to sit with: porous, durational, and alive with potential. The para-pedagogical, as articulated here, is both a vessel and an invitation to begin again, beside again, and again.

Keywords: para-pedagogical, fermentation intelligences, institutional critique, eco-pedagogies, para-curatorial

## 100-word bio

Lleah Smith practices at the intersection of pedagogy, art, and the curatorial. Since 2012, she has made significant contributions in the Asia-Pacific Region, working independently and through institutional roles. She is currently Head of Public Practice & Creative Enquiry at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery | Len Lye Centre and Puke Ariki Museum and Libraries in Ngāmotu, Aotearoa.

Her PhD research at Monash University agitates the pedagogy–art–curatorial relationship by positioning fermentation as teacher, speculative metaphor, and guiding force for change. Smith creates spaces of productive agitation within caring environments that enable difference to flourish.

Her independent research into the para-pedagogical—which bubbled up during a 2024 residency at Konstmuseet i Norr (KIN), Sweden and cultivated over 12 years of practice—extends this enquiry into situated, materially grounded curatorial methodologies.

## The Culture of the ‘Para’

The para-pedagogical did not begin as a theory for me. It emerged as something more unruly, cultured slowly across places, relations, and moments of institutional dissonance. It came through agitation: the quiet resistance of learning practices that didn’t fit, that didn’t clarify, that didn’t translate easily into institutional outcomes. It grew, like fermentation, from the margins. From what bubbled. From what refused to settle.

Yet, it is a term with a lineage. In 2008, Erickson articulated a *para-pedagogical* practice that runs alongside mainstream college instruction by drawing on the concept of ‘mystification’ from Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1992, 2001). He rejected commonplace mystifications of writing and instead created the *Writer’s Journey* para-pedagogy: twelve semi-prescriptive, reflective activities designed to engage First-Year Composition students without recourse to dominant ideological frameworks. In 2015, Zerdy and Daddario framed the para-pedagogical as a bootleg practice of emancipatory, student-driven learning that runs alongside university education, reclaiming ‘failure’ as generative. Their bootleg class on listening redefined the classroom as a materialist utopia where students and facilitators engaged in reflective, embodied practices of attentiveness. Listening, both as a sensory act and a philosophical stance, became a central ethical practice.

In October 2024, Canadian theorists Erin Manning and Brian Massumi (2024) framed the para-pedagogical as a practice that moves fluidly across philosophy, artistic practice, and formal pedagogy. They described it as requiring an attunement to time-sensitive, emergent logics of knowledge creation and situate it within practices of resistance. This is particularly resonate in the context of 3E, a grassroots off-grid environment designed to host people, events, and experiences (Manning & Massumi, 2024, para. 3). The 3Ecologies Project is an autonomous organization dedicated to participatory experimentation in research creation. It is described as “an autonomous ‘para-institutional’ space – a kind of adjacent undercommons, spun off from the university while remaining in complex relation to it” (3Ecologies, n.d).

What seems to be shared is an interest in interrogating the way learning functions within mainstream education. What also strikes me is that the history of the para-pedagogical is entangled with the university as the primary ‘institution’ one is seeking to disrupt. In contrast, the para-pedagogical in this context emerges in direct relation with the cultural and artistic institution, primarily the gallery and museum sector. It seeks to liberate pedagogy from the contextualising of objects and artefacts through the reimagining of learning, people and more-than-human bodies and energies as material.

With this foundation in place, this paper asks: *What might it mean to treat learning as central—not supplementary—to cultural institutions? And what might the para-pedagogical learn from fermentation—as metaphor, and as method?* These questions are not rhetorical; they are rooted in lived, messy experiences. To trace their earliest cultures, we must move from theory to practice—from the margins to bellies and galleries to ecosystems. For me, the para-pedagogical emerges through practice and an ongoing engagement with the edges—edges encountered in New Delhi, Western Sydney, Kiruna, and Ngāmotu, where the boundaries between art, life and learning blurred.

This paper ferments two bodies of research into one: the para-pedagogical, as a situated, sovereign practice of learning beside; and the fermentation intelligences that have shaped and suffused it—intellectually, materially, and methodologically. The question at the heart of this work is not how to define the para-pedagogical, but how to stay with it. I began

thinking with the term ‘para-pedagogical’ in October of 2024 while grappling with feelings around the ‘para-curatorial’ (Hoffman, 2011, 2013; McDowell, 2016) and the desire to extend upon Helguera’s model of *Education as Art* (Helguera, 2024), which will be unpacked further in subsequent sections. But for me, the para-pedagogical seeks to recognise pedagogical practices within arts and cultural institutions that move with their intentionality, not in service to an exhibition but in dialogue with institutional values and community needs, which is a deviation from earlier manifestations of the practice.

### The Grammar of this ‘Para’

While the para-pedagogical boldly asks: *What might it mean to treat learning as central—not supplementary—to cultural institutions?* It must be said that it also emerges in dialogue and opposition to the para-curatorial (Hoffman, 2011, 2013; McDowell, 2016). The prefix *para* holds its etymology in Greek and carries a double meaning. It is both *beside* and *beyond*, but also, crucially, can be translated as *amiss* or *irregular*. That instability—semantic, structural, political—is where this work lives. The para-pedagogical does not claim neutrality. It embraces its adjacency, its asymmetry, and its deviation. It begins from beside, not to complete, but to unsettle.

American-born, Australia-based curator and art historian Tara McDowell’s (2016) framing of the para-curatorial was one of the first to position the term within curatorial discourse. She describes it as “the array of curatorial activities that are usually parenthetical or supplementary to the exhibition proper” (p. 22). The terms *parenthetical*, *supplementary*, and *proper* rub up against me. ‘Parenthetical’ explains or qualifies. ‘Supplementary’ implies dependency. ‘Proper’ asserts hierarchy. These are not neutral descriptors—they entrench a power relation between the exhibition and everything else that supports it, orbits it. This tension is not lost on McDowell. She acknowledges that the pairing of ‘para’ and ‘curatorial’ is a provocation: “an unstable binary, a dubious hierarchy... and a theory in which to poke holes” (p. 24). That instability is not something to be resolved—it’s something to be worked with. To be fermented. To be disrupted.

Costa Rican-born, London-based curator Jens Hoffmann (2011, 2013) similarly invokes the para-curatorial as a category of activities that include “lectures, screenings, exhibitions without art, working with artists on projects without ever producing anything that could be exhibited” (2011, para. 6). For Hoffmann, these practices are not insignificant, but they are paratextual, always in relation to a ‘main text’, the ‘exhibition proper’. He draws from Gérard Genette’s theory of the paratext (1991) the title pages, footnotes, prefaces, and blurbs that support the primary body of a text. Hoffmann’s frustration is clear when he critiques the way curating has been expanded to include any act of selection—menus, playlists, and interior design. His response is to double down on the exhibition as curating’s ‘proper form’. The centre that holds everything else in its orbit, but the para-pedagogical is not content to orbit. It does not seek to supplement the exhibition. It proposes an entirely different axis.

This requires, first, an important clarification: curating is not the same as the curatorial. While curating is often defined as the act of selecting, organising, and displaying (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024), the curatorial has, over the last two decades, been theorised as something more processual, ecological, and situated (Rogoff, 2006; Lind, 2021). The curatorial is not format-bound—it is method, ethics, and affect. I draw here on multiple thinkers and practitioners who have shaped this redefinition. Maria Lind positions the curatorial as “a

multidimensional role that includes critique, editing, education, fundraising” (2021, para. 8). I see the para-pedagogical as a parallel multidimensionality. I follow Irit Rogoff’s (2013) assertion that the curatorial constitutes “an event of knowledge” (p. 45), producing relations between things, which are not necessarily art. That language—*event, relation, not necessarily art*, is foundational. It opens the possibility that pedagogy might not explain art but may occur beside it. That pedagogy might itself constitute a site of knowledge production, transformation, encounter and enquiry.

Curatorial work in the Asia Pacific Region further complicates and expands these positions. Ute Meta Bauer (2016) argues that curatorial thinking unfolds in “new sites and situations”—in streets, studios, and schools. Not just museums. Not just white walls. David Teh (2016), writing from Singapore, notes the porosity and ‘shareware’ of Southeast Asian curatorial practices—models rooted not in exclusivity, but in relational openness. ruangrupa’s *lambung* (documenta fifteen, 2022) didn’t offer a theme; it offered a method: surplus redistribution, collective structuring, and resource pooling. It didn’t curate an exhibition. It built an alternative economy.

Friendship, as articulated by Zoe Butt (2015) and Indonesian duo Dika+Lija (2023), offers another model. Friendship, in their terms, is not affective nicety—it is political infrastructure. It is how one resists extractive logics and builds durational structures of co-learning. These values resonate deeply with the para-pedagogical. They allow us to think of pedagogy not as content delivery, but as attunement without coercion. And so, the para-pedagogical emerges from this context and this lineage of theory, but it proposes a reorientation of institutional practice towards slow, story-rich, and situated pedagogical enquiry. It resists becoming legible through outcomes or deliverables. It is not opposed to the exhibition, but it is not tethered to it. It moves beside. It ferments. The para-pedagogical asks what it might mean to centre learning, not just as content, but as practice. As a sovereign site of institutional meaning-making. It refuses the instrumentalisation of education as audience development. It resists being positioned only in service to a curatorial exhibition vision. It insists that pedagogy is not there to explain. It is there to ask. This reframing is also a reckoning. It acknowledges how pedagogical labour—especially when feminised, racialised, or grounded in Indigenous and non-Western traditions—has been devalued, under-cited, underpaid, and overlooked. The para-pedagogical does not seek assimilation into dominant structures. It does not seek centrality. It seeks to reorient the institution itself toward hosting, toward relation, toward the more-than-human.

It is not display-based. It is processual. It is atmospheric.

As Pablo Helguera (2010) insists, education in art should not be seen as support material—it is material. It shapes the conditions under which art, relation, and publicness can occur. The para-pedagogical takes this further.

It says we do not arrive after the art.

*We arrive with it.*

*We stay longer.*

*Together.*

*With people, with bodies, with atmospheres as material.*

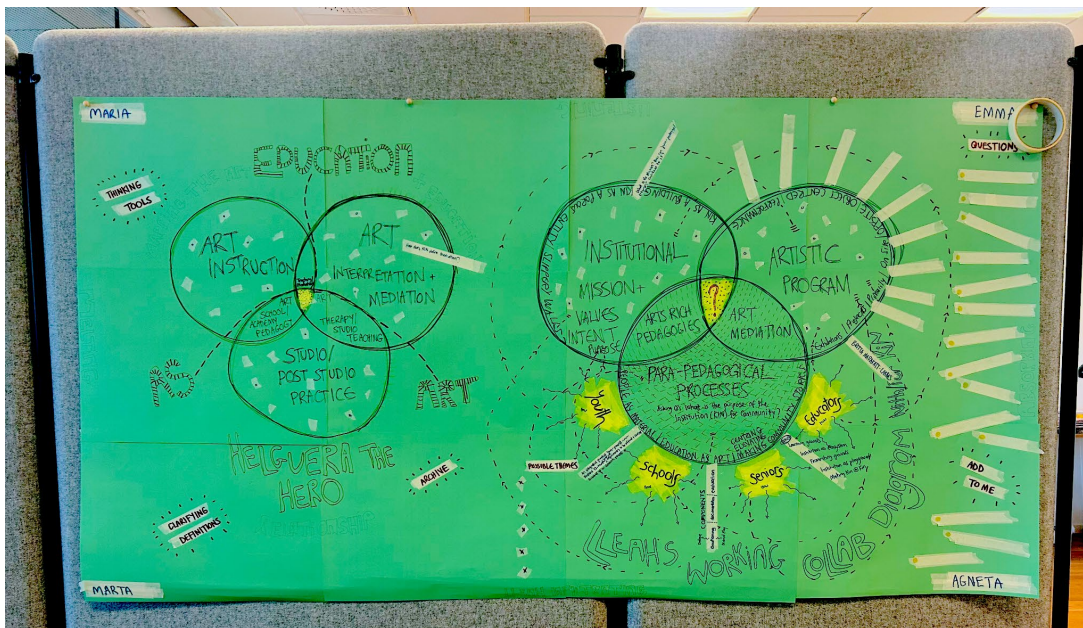
## Honouring my Foundations

If the para-pedagogical fermented in the cracks of institutional work, then its earliest traceable cultures—however incomplete—might be found in New Delhi, 2011, when I worked at Khoj International Artists' Association. There, amid the textured edges of a dense urban neighbourhood, I began building a pedagogical approach that sought to invite diverse publics into its process. There was no pre-existing model, only a sense that learning could be otherwise: slow, dialogical, porous, and embodied. At Khoj, space had already been carved out through a commitment to taking contemporary art outside institutional walls, particularly via a sustained engagement with public art and ecological thinking. This ethos is expressed through two formative projects: *In Context: Public.Art.Ecology* (2011-2013) which unfolded over two years across India and evolved into a focus on food security, production, and ritual, and *Negotiating Routes: Ecologies of the Byways* (2010-2014), which catalysed site-specific, interdisciplinary responses to the National Highway Development Program (NHDP)—a timely intervention amid contested land rights and coercive development. It was within this ferment of ideas and urgencies that I attempted to build a Learning Department. I did not have a plan, but I recognised a gap. I spent the next few years calling schools, persuading principals, and trying to articulate why students should visit a place where the art might not be on the walls, where the work was sometimes in flux or unseen. In those early gestures, I now see the fermentation intelligences at work. *Agitating towards stability* (Chen, 2018)—where discomfort didn't need to be resolved. *Preserving and transforming* (Fournier, 2020)—where knowledge held lineage but remained responsive. These were not metaphors. They were pedagogical conditions at work.

At the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo/Parramatta, where I spent some time as an auxiliary body - an Artistic Associate, I was guided by a strong, poetic and purposeful institutional voice, *At the service of stories*, which is part of Powerhouse's new strategic vision that emerged during the renewal project. It became a grounding logic. The para-pedagogical took further root here, not in practice but as a way of 'thinking with'. A way of programming not from content, but from context. I consider this move towards *adjacency* as an enabling force that allows programming, learning and knowledge exchange to begin with questions rather than themes, objects or people. When moving beyond a person-centred or object-centred logic, something else becomes possible; alternative questions rise to the top, such as *Who is this institution for? How are resources distributed? Who gets to speak? Who do we serve and to what end?*

Whilst fermenting in the container of my body for a few months, the term para-pedagogical truly flourished during a residency at Konstmuseet i Norr (KIN) in Kiruna, Sweden, in October 2024. Here, I worked with the museum's mediation team at the invitation of Swedish Curator and Artistic Director Maria Lind. I arrived with practices cultivated in the Asia Pacific, but quickly realised that not everything should travel. That agitation was instrumental in my thinking; it was the first time I was able to verbally and visually articulate how I thought pedagogical practice could look, or rather should look in a museum or cultural institution, irrespective of where you are situated in the world, Asia, the Pacific or the Swedish Arctic, it didn't matter. I sketched a diagram reworking Pablo Helguera's model of *Education as Art* (Helguera, 2024) to illustrate the messy thoughts that had been bubbling in my body for more than a decade and were finally becoming form. Three entangled logics: artistic programming, institutional intent, and para-pedagogical practice. Not concentric. Not linear. More like culture. Shaped by leaks, overlaps, and mutual activation.

**Figure 1**  
*A visual explanation of the Para-Pedagogical (own work).*



The para-pedagogical does not belong to a single moment or site—it has fermented slowly across Delhi, Western Sydney, the Swedish Arctic, and now Aotearoa. Each context added texture; each agitation made its mark. What began as a gut-sense in the margins has gradually taken shape—first as practice, then as language, and eventually, as structure. What follows is an account of how the para-pedagogical now lives and breathes within an institutional ecology, in Ngāmotu, Aotearoa, where adjacency is not just metaphor, but method.

### Honouring my Present

In September 2024, I moved to Ngāmotu, Taranaki, to take on the position of Cultural Experiences, Public Programmes and Learning Lead across the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery | Len Lye Centre and Puke Ariki Museum and Libraries—an institutional ecology defined by relation. We have 11 people in our team: *Programmer, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery | Len Lye Centre, Programmer, Puke Ariki, Pasifika Programmer, Māori Programmer* and a *Learning Supervisor*. We also have 5 *Kaiako (Educators)* in our team who also work across the three institutions. Each arrives with interwoven histories, trusted community connections, curatorial insights honed through research, a commitment to educational practice, and other unique expertise. Our team does not sit within one department or discipline. We move between, with, and beside—weaving across. This adjacency is the condition. It is the para-pedagogical made structural. It allows for a distinctly para-logic to take root: one that weaves different knowledge hubs together, not for coherence, but for co-presence. It cultivates an ecology of relation where learning circulates laterally, where resources are shared, and where institutional memory stretches across silos. This is not a seamless or frictionless arrangement. It holds tension and welcomes the leak.

In many ways, this model has been born of necessity. Shrinking budgets, constrained resources, and funding precarity demand a kind of institutional elasticity. But within those constraints lies a radical potential: a call to reimagine resourcefulness not as scarcity but as a

method. In this frame, sustainability is not a rhetorical flourish—it is a generative and regenerative practice. Degrowth and slow instituting become potential practices and a way of engaging critically with ideas of use, value and purpose. The para-pedagogical in this context is not applied to a single program or department; it is infrastructural and therein lies the great experiment.

This commitment to emergent structure is perhaps most clearly reflected in our recent renaming. As of 1 July, we are no longer the Public Programmes and Learning team, but the Public Practice & Creative Enquiry team. This shift is more than semantic; it enacts the para-pedagogical through language. These are familiar terms, yet placed together, they resist fixed definition—an ambiguity that invites our team to actively shape its meaning with their communities. We define Public as a people-centred position, ensuring participatory methods remain central. Practice signals continuity—an evolving journey, not a one-off encounter. Creative speaks to the generative nature of our work across audiences and timelines. Enquiry foregrounds depth, curiosity, and critical engagement with art, culture, histories, and futures. This naming acknowledges work already happening while elevating its significance. It is a structural gesture—one that uplifts both people and their mahi (work).

And so, a research portal opens that enables leadership to become a pedagogical act, where my role is to support our team in becoming the kind of programmers, educators, or community leaders they aspire to be. This approach is inspired by Mexican-American artist and educator Jorge Lucero's (2016) assertion that the role of an educator is, fundamentally, to help other educators become the kind of educators they wish to be. In this way, the para-pedagogical can shape how we meet the Other, how we plan, how we stretch across demands, how we prioritise, and how we measure purpose and value. It is slow, yes—but it is not passive. It is a deliberate form of reorienting toward what matters: relation, care, responsiveness and, as Lebanese-American essayist and mathematical statistician Nassim Nicholas Taleb (2012) would say, the 'anti-fragile.' A curious term that cannot exist without crisis, compression and rupture.

We often speak of slow institutions, of sustainable futures, of decolonial and Indigenous-led methodologies—but rarely are these values held at the level of organisational design outside of grassroots instituting. Here, in this small node on the west coast of Aotearoa, there is an opportunity to test these values at scale. To not only speak of para-logics but to enact them—to let pedagogy lead from context, and to treat cultural work as shared enquiry. This is not a case study to be scaled. It is an emergent ecology—a vessel for the now.

What I am tracing here is a culture. A practice that ferments in place, but can be (and should be) led by similar values as those outlined throughout this paper. It insists on specificity, on situatedness. It is shaped as much by soil, water and season alongside programming and planning.

But what, exactly, ferments? And how might fermentation—beyond metaphor—offer pedagogy? The next section dwells here. Turning toward the microbial, the messy, and the relational, I attend to the logics of fermentation not as a framework to apply, but as a set of living intelligences already entangled with the para-pedagogical as I understand it.

### **Honouring Fermentation**

Fermentation had been present all along—in the sideways movements, the porous structures, the unruly timelines, but it wasn't until I began working through the iterative,

embodied process of PhD research that I came to understand it not only as metaphor, but as method. A methodology of doing. Of attending to what ferments quietly beneath the surface, the para-pedagogical, I came to see, can be moved by the rhythm of fermentation's logics. The intelligences of fermentation framed through my PhD research—*contamination* (Van Groll & Kummen, 2021; Tsing, 2015), *queer temporalities* (Halberstam, 2005; McCallum and Tuhkanen, 2011), *interspecies kinship* (Haraway, 2016), *agitating towards stability* (Chen, 2018) and *preserving and transforming* (Fournier, 2020; Katz, 2020)—were already encoded in the values of the para-pedagogical. *Contamination*, for instance, had always been there—in the porousness of programs that refused disciplinary boundaries, in the way community and institutional knowledge leaked into one another, and in the refusal to sanitise learning into neat outcomes. *Queer temporalities* surfaced in the non-linear pacing of programs, in the willingness to dwell in the not-yet, and in the insistence that some pedagogical processes needed to wander, loop, and return. *Interspecies kinship* had shaped my attention to context from the beginning, but only in the research did I see how microbial, material and environmental conditions were not just background but co-actors in how learning could unfold. Whether through the souring of milk in Delhi's heat or the soft mossy quiet of Kiruna's sub-Arctic terrain, these more-than-human rhythms structured the way relations were formed, questions were held, and transformation was made possible.

These fermentation intelligences do not offer a framework to apply in all circumstances, but they reveal an ecological opportunity already in motion. One where pedagogy is not about a mastered skill, or remembering information, but one that is centred on attunement, attention and critical reflection. Where to learn is to leak, to be influenced, to change in contact with others—human and otherwise. Where slowness is not failure, the mess is not misstep, and pedagogy, when practised in the 'para', is less about delivery and more about cultivation. Cultivation not of outcomes, but of conditions.

*A warm jar.*

*A gentle hold.*

*An invitation to bubble.*

This is what the para-pedagogical learns from fermentation.

### **Becoming ~ Becoming ~ Becoming: Fermentation Intelligences in this 'Para'**

Within para-pedagogical practice, learning is not organised around outcomes, objects, or interpretive clarity. It is dis/organised. Slow. Sovereign. It leaks across institutional boundaries and refuses the exhibition as an epistemic anchor. Instead, it asks: *how else might knowledge circulate? What other logics might guide our being-with?* The five fermentation intelligences cultivated through my PhD research offer one mode of conceptual companion to this reorientation. They are not metaphors layered on top, but methodologies drawn from material practice and more-than-human thinking. Each intelligence animates a para-pedagogical ecology—one that learns through agitation, relation, and transformation.

**Figure 2**  
*A visual explanation of the Fermentation Intelligences (own work).*



- **Agitating Towards Stability (Chen, 2018)**

*What might it mean to focus on the embodiment of agitation as a form of living presence... rather than on the strategies used to kill it?*

Chen, 2018, p.551

This provocation by queer disability activist and theorist Mel Y. Chen sits at the heart of this fermentation intelligence. What if agitation is not a disruption to be resolved, but a vital presence to be held? Reimagined as purposeful, generative, and necessary, agitation invites us to think with rather than against discomfort. In the context of fermentation, agitation is what ensures transformation, encouraging interactions between elements so they do not settle too quickly, allowing for a desirable and stable outcome to emerge. But here, stability is not stasis. As Chen reminds us, the stable can also be in motion.

Transposed into social and organisational ecologies, this intelligence suggests that continual questioning, challenge, and movement can generate resilience rather than collapse. Within para-pedagogical practice, agitation is not noise to be silenced but structure to be metabolised. It becomes a way of working with agitation, not to resolve or erase it, but to stay with it, allowing disagreement, ambiguity, and friction to teach. Agitation, in this frame, is not the opposite of relation; it is relation in motion.

- **Preserving and Transforming (Fournier, 2020; Katz, 2020)**

*Fermentation embodies the paradoxical cooperation between these processes of preservation and transformation that, at first, might seem antithetical.*

Fournier, 2020, p.96

*As a force for change, fermentation is relatively gentle. Bubbles are not flames. Still, they do transform material and matter.*

Katz, 2020, p. 25

Fermentation's paradox lies in its dual capacity: to preserve and to transform. Each fermenting process alters what it touches—materials shift, textures deepen, and meanings evolve (Fournier, 2020, p. 96). This quiet transformation pays homage to the labour, relations, and learnings carried within bodies and across skins, acknowledging both ancestral memory and present entanglements.

Fermentation, as both process and metaphor, carries ancestral ties to place, culture, practice, and environment. It is grounded in seasonal knowledge and attuned to time, as both duration and timing. These practices often operate through intergenerational knowledge-sharing, where recipes, rhythms, and techniques are passed between kin, embedding cultural continuity into daily life. This living inheritance does not remain static; it actively shapes and is shaped by contemporary exchanges, influencing how communities gather, nourish, and sustain each other today.

In this porous process, the encounter becomes both a site of care and contamination, where shared space shapes what emerges. The intelligence of *Preserving and transforming* insists we can honour what came before while remaining attuned to the urgencies of now. For para-pedagogical practice, it offers a structure of care that embraces continuity. It is not about preserving institutional forms but about preserving relation, memory, and co-existence, always with the expectation of transformation.

Rather than monumentalising the past, this approach legitimises change grounded in body-memory, history, and lived context. It invites us to move with culture, not around it—preserving not what is fixed, but what is felt.

- **Contamination (Van Groll & Kummen, 2021; Tsing, 2015)**

*Microbially, interspecies contact and the resulting “contamination” is not only inevitable but an essential aspect of our world making. As humans, we are always contaminating and being contaminated in our encounters with the world.*

Van Groll & Kummen, 2021, p 33

*Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option.*

Tsing, 2015, p 27

*Contamination* teaches us that contact is constitutive. To ferment is to invite encounter—to host and be hosted, to become-with others in ways that cannot be fully anticipated or controlled. Contamination in this sense is not failure or risk, but a vital process of co-becoming. It reveals how change is often carried in through the porous edges: the air, the hands, the vessel, not fully sterilised. In fermentation, contamination is neither accident nor error—it is the logic that allows something to come alive.

The quotes from Van Groll & Kummén (2021) and Tsing (2015) affirm this: that contamination is not a deviation from the norm, but the norm itself. It is both unavoidable and necessary. In this frame, purity is a myth; all things carry the traces of encounter. To ferment is to lean into this inevitability—to welcome the microbial, material, cultural and conceptual residues of others, and allow them to shape what becomes.

Within para-pedagogical practice, contamination shifts from metaphor to method. It challenges the clean borders of institutional knowledge production, unsettling the logics of control, mastery, and containment that often underpin educational design. Contamination here becomes a force that allows epistemologies to leak into and through one another—queer, Indigenous, ecological, decolonial—co-existing not in harmony, but in agitation, tension, and interdependence.

Pedagogy, when informed by this intelligence, becomes hybrid and cross-pollinated. It resists single-origin narratives and instead values the intermingling of perspectives, bodies, and experiences. Contamination legitimises pedagogies that are in-process, in-relation, and in-transit. It opens space for learning that is collaborative but not always coherent, layered but not always legible.

To work para-pedagogically is to accept that we are always already contaminated—and that this is a condition of ethical relation. It invites educators, artists, programmers, curators and institutions to loosen their grip on control, and instead attune to what emerges through shared presence, porous boundaries, and messy, entangled becoming. It is a call to embrace complexity, to refuse sanitisation, and to let learning ferment in the open air.

- **Queer Temporalities (Halberstam, 2005; McCallum and Tuhkanen, 2011)**

*If we try to think about queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices... we detach queerness from sexual identity and come closer to understanding Foucault's comment in 'Friendship as a Way of Life' 'homosexuality threatens people as a 'way of life' rather than as a way of having sex.*

Halberstam, 2005, p. 310

*If queer theorists have agreed on anything, it is that for queer thought to have any specificity at all, it must be characterized by becoming (not being) and the constant breaking of habits.*

McCallum and Tuhkanen, 2011, p. ix

*Queer Temporalities* offer a rejection of normative timeframes, emphasising a more inclusive breath, breadth, scale, and rhythm—ways of being and becoming that resist the structures of straight time. As Halberstam (2005) suggests, queerness emerges through *strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices*, positioning queer time as fundamentally oppositional to heteronormative logics of family, productivity, and reproduction. Tuhkanen and McCallum (2011) remind us that queer thought gains its specificity not from stasis, but from the *constant breaking of habits*—from becoming rather than being. These provocations underlie the generative potential of queer temporalities as a fermentation

intelligence: one that disrupts conventional narratives and advocates for ecological, communal, and more-than-human attunement to time.

In para-pedagogical contexts, queer temporality allows for delay, for wandering, for rhythms that emerge through relation rather than imposition. It resists the tyranny of deliverables and refuses the logic of linear progression. This intelligence legitimises forms of learning that unfold, ferment, and linger—expanding duration as a site of meaning-making. Programming shaped by this intelligence might begin with a single story and stretch across seasons. It holds space for slow noticing, long-term attunement, and the generative excess of learning that refuses to arrive on time.

- **Interspecies Kinship (Haraway, 2016)**

*What must be cut and what must be tied if multispecies flourishing on earth, including human and other-than-human beings in kinship, are to have a chance?*

(Haraway, 2016, p. 2).

Life unfolds through entanglements—across species, ecosystems, materials and scales of being. Fermentation embodies this: a practice made possible only through microbial co-operation, through unseen but intimate relations that span human, more-than-human and environmental bodies. It reveals how change is a shared process, how life sustains itself not through separation, but through complex, interdependent ties.

Haraway's provocation foregrounds kinship not as given, but as an active, ethical practice: a question of which relations we maintain, which we sever, and to what ends. In fermentation, to tie is to stay with the microbial, the fungal and the bacterial. To move beyond the visual as the primary sense and to recognise that the body perceives and receives knowledge cues in a variety of ways. Taken seriously, this kinship holds ecological consequences. It challenges anthropocentric control and asks instead what modes of shared living we must cultivate for multispecies flourishing to be possible.

For para-pedagogical practice, this intelligence decentres the human as sole knower or maker. It remakes the institutional imaginary around co-agency. Programming influenced by this intelligence listens to more-than-human rhythms—seasonal decay, microbial timing, fungal bloom—and takes these as pedagogical signals, not environmental background.

Rather than incorporating the more-than-human as metaphor or theme, interspecies kinship requires that we work *with* it. This includes shaping learning environments that are ecologically entangled—where microbial presences matter, where vegetal timelines count, where pedagogical pulses include the flourishing of all kinds.

Interspecies kinship, then, is a call to make and remake learning spaces as shared habitats.

### Figure 3

*Documentation of the Thinking Bodies. Fermenting Worlds series at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery | Len Lye Centre by Lleah Smith, activating the Fermentation Intelligences through hands-on workshops.*



These intelligences do not form a toolkit, or even a cohesive methodology. They ferment. They interact, leak, contradict, and bubble. They offer no fixed order or outcome, but instead signal a different mode of sensing, making, and teaching—one that is responsive to context, to relation, to the ecological and institutional conditions in which learning takes place.

In this sense, fermentation is not only a metaphor but the method. It names the porous, shifting ground of para-pedagogical practice, where transformation occurs not despite instability, but through it. These five intelligences—agitating towards stability, preserving and transforming, contamination, queer temporalities, and interspecies kinship—do not prescribe, but provoke. They invite us to reimagine pedagogy not as delivery or control, but as attunement, entanglement, and agitation.

Importantly, these are not the only intelligences that could shape a para-pedagogical world. They are five among many: partial, situated and lively. What they offer is an open ecology—a pedagogical orientation that makes room for other logics to enter, take hold, and transform what comes next. To welcome a way of *being otherwise* or *beside*.

To work para-pedagogically with fermentation is to commit to the unfinished.

It is to begin again—and again—and again with the belief that through agitation, relation, and contamination, new worlds might be rendered possible.

### **A Case in Ferment: *The Fermenting Kunsthalle, Bern, Switzerland***

If fermentation is more than metaphor—if it is a method for institutional becoming—then how might it unfold in real time, within an actual cultural structure?

In 2024, Kunsthalle Bern undertook an ambitious institutional experiment under renovation—one that embodied fermentation not as metaphor but as method. Entitled *The Fermenting Kunsthalle*, the project emerged during the building’s physical transformation from June 2024 to March 2025, yet rather than suspending activity, the institution used the interruption as a site of reflection and pedagogical reconfiguration. It asked: “When can an institution take a breath? How does an institution become a ‘work in progress’?” (Kunsthalle Bern, 2024). These questions signal an intent not only to disrupt routine but to animate the institution as a fermenting vessel—open to change, agitation, and new rhythms of co-creation.

This framing resonates with the fermentation intelligence *Agitating Towards Stability*, where transformation does not arrive through resolution but by staying with the trouble (Haraway, 2016). The building itself became a membrane, wrapped in jute sacks as part of a new commission by Ibrahim Mahama, whose work gestures toward the histories of global labour, displacement, and infrastructural neglect. Rather than merely decorating the façade, Mahama’s installation enacted a material form of agitation: both protective and disruptive, ceremonial and infrastructural (McGivern, 2025).

The institutional programme titled *With a Little Help From My Friends* carried this ethos further, positioning friendship as a methodology. This was not simply thematic but structural. Friendship as a method invited para-pedagogical commitments: co-presence, slowness, collective authorship, and lingering attention. The programme extended beyond outputs into durational rhythms, speculative enquiry, and the recalibration of what institutional work can hold (e-flux, 2024). Fermentation, in this frame, becomes a way of staying with the ‘not-yet’, allowing meaning and relation to form slowly, through attunement rather than production.

In April 2025, the project deepened through *Social Fermentation*, a workshop led by Maya Minder and Byungseo Yoo. Their work brought traditional Korean fermentation practices—particularly kimchi-making—into the institutional frame, embedding more-than-human relations, intergenerational knowledge, and microbial stewardship into the pedagogical field. As Minder facilitated participants through processes of bringing and seasoning, Yoo shared family recipes passed down through generations. This event became more than a culinary session; it enacted a trans-local exchange, where ecological knowledge travelled across language, context, and body. In doing so, it modelled what the fermentation intelligence *Interspecies Kinship* invites: that the microbial is not metaphor but method, that ancestral knowledge embedded in foodways can reorient how institutions learn, share, and hold space.

What emerged in *The Fermenting Kunsthalle* was not a themed programme but a structural fermentation—an institutional commitment to leak, to dwell, and to attend. It trusted in process, kinship, and speculation. In para-pedagogical terms, this was not a case study to be scaled but a vessel for the now. Fermentation was not something referenced—it was enacted. It moved through architecture, time, bodies, recipes, and relations. It was a pedagogy of suspension, a pedagogy of pressure, and a pedagogy of breath.

Ultimately, the project affirms what fermentation intelligences suggest: that to work para-pedagogically is to resist closure, to remain open to re-becoming, and to accept the unfinished as a generative condition. Fermentation is not a detour or a hobby. It is the work, and sometimes, it is within the institutional pause that new imaginaries begin to bubble.

Though grounded in the Global North, *The Fermenting Kunsthalle* (and its *Social Fermentation* iteration) has a lot to teach us here in the Asia-Pacific and the Global South about what it means to pause with purpose.

### **A Case in Ferment: Lalaga, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery | Len Lye Centre, Ngāmotu, Taranaki, Aotearoa**

When I stepped into my role as Cultural Experiences, Public Programs and Learning Lead, I entered an institution—or rather, a network of entangled institutions—already thick with ferment. My arrival coincided with the opening of *Lalaga: Le Hui Fono*, 2 Nov 2024 - 25 May 2025, an exhibition at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, which served as the culmination of a three-year web of relations nurtured through purposeful enquiry.

Dr Zara Stanhope, Director, Cultural Experiences, which includes the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery | Len Lye Centre and Puke Ariki Museum and Libraries generously reminded me a few days ago that this journey began with a question: *Who are we?*—as in, who are we as an institution, with its people, its spaces, and its guiding ethos—and *Who are we?* in terms of the local community, the Pasifika peoples and their networks in Taranaki. That initial question sparked a commitment to co-enquiry.

In the earliest phase, securing a grant from Creative NZ enabled the gallery to employ a dedicated Pasifika Programmer for six months—Theresa Tongi—whose lived experience and community connections brought local Pasifika voices to the fore. Theresa’s appointment focused on embedding someone with deep cultural knowledge into the Gallery’s programming team, so that she could reach into churches, schools, marae, and family networks, extending up and building purposeful relationships. These first steps—meeting, listening, building trust—wove together Pasifika artists, elders, and community groups with gallery staff.

Once additional funding was found to continue Theresa’s role, the opportunity arose to bring Ruha Fifiata on board as Pacific Curator-at-Large. Ruha arrived from Meanjin (Brisbane), bringing curatorial expertise honed through work on the Asia Pacific Triennial at QAGOMA and lived experience as an artist and independent curator. Her brief asked, *What value do we, the Gallery, hold for Pasifika communities and Pacific artists?* Research and relationships formed a single practice: each conversation enriched the Gallery’s understanding of Pasifika cultural protocols, and ways of making, gathering and sharing knowledges.

From the very beginning, ‘weaving together’ functioned as both metaphor and practice. Theresa first articulated this early on, and it became the underpinning ethos of all subsequent activities visible and invisible to the public—a gesture that blurred boundaries between artist, institution, host, community member and visitor.

The notion of ‘being public’ didn’t arrive fully formed. It stirred and shifted in conversation. Zara once described the first *Lalaga Pasifika* day on Saturday, 28 May 2022, as a massive boiling pot—it had heat. The Gallery burst open: hand-woven textiles, Samoan tattooing, Pasifika kai trucks out front, performances unfolding into all corners. It felt alive. The morning pōwhiri, with speeches and kava, set the tone, not just as a welcome, but as a shared holding of place with Mana Whenua in the Gallery context.

Over the next three years, that three-way entanglement deepened. At the pōwhiri in November 2024 for *Lalaga: Le Hui Fono*, it was there—held by Māori and Pacific leaders,

and again, grounded by kava. In between those anchor points, Theresa and Ruha moved relationally, cultivating space inside and outside the Gallery, private weaving sessions on Sundays, live ngatu work in *Te Au: Liquid Constituencies* with Robin White and a collective from Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland), the formation of *Te Moana Nui-a-Kiwa* advisory group, Moana Soundz drumming with local youth, and grassroots making for each *Lalaga* day.

These gatherings—some quiet, some loud—fermented over time. Each interaction left a trace. The Gallery became less a container and more a porous membrane, holding and held by vibrant communities.

When I returned to the Gallery in early 2025, after undertaking my residency at KIN in the Swedish Arctic, I arrived at a moment when the Gallery was again fermenting under the pressure of relation, resistance, and re-imagination. The colonial architecture of the ‘modern, white-walled gallery’ had begun to soften, contaminated by relational modes of working that refused neat separations. Curation, pedagogy, programming, artmaking, and community engagement seeped into one another. In Theresa and Ruha’s approach, labels like curator, educator, host, artist and/or collector became slippery. Their work demanded warmth, generosity, and a degree of chaos.

By April 2025, the *Lalaga Talanoa* marked another bubbling—three days of collective enquiry from the 25th to the 27th that brought together past contributors and new interlocutors to ask not *What now, but what next? What might come after an exhibition that was never meant to be a conclusion? How could the work continue without hardening into programmatic repetition? How could the work remain alive and resonant?*

Manatikanga (hospitality) became a critical mode of pedagogy. The *Talanoa* hosted a community kai (food) event for 80 Pacific elders, community members, artists, young people and participants arranged in the mode of a marae. The learning studios became kitchens, halls, and places of laughter and recognition. Taro cakes, island music, young people’s voices, and ancestral blessings folded into the walls of the institution. These weren’t add-ons. They were atmospheres. They reconfigured what counted as artistic and cultural work, and how it could be held.

At that moment, the Govett-Brewster did not host Pacific communities. It was hosted by them, and this inversion—this para-relationality—was a profound expression of the para-pedagogical. It echoed what fermentation does best: destabilise fixed forms, hold the difference in relation, and create the conditions for transformation that are not dictated by the centre. Importantly, this did not happen outside the institution. It happened within it, but not from its centre.

The role of Zara Stanhope, Director of Cultural Experiences, formerly the Director of the Govett-Brewster, was pivotal here. Her expansive, trusting leadership created the structural warmth needed—she held the container open. This is the kind of *agitation towards flourishing* the para-pedagogical calls for. One that allows discomfort, friction, opacity and emergence to be part of the learning. One that resists clarity too soon. One who believes in pedagogy as a relational vessel—as a support. To host, not to extract. *Lalaga/Pasifika/Le Hui Fono/Talanoa* is a practice, a methodology and a value system. It did not arrive with answers; it arrived with a question, and in its wake, it leaves a residue that brews slowly, that leaks and stains, that calls for institutions to not just represent communities but to be transformed by them.

This is what flourishing looks like in the para-pedagogical: not calm or resolution but a continuous fermentation of purpose, relation, and institutional possibility.

A refusal to settle.

**Figure 4**

*Personal documentation from the Lalaga Talanoa 25 - 27 April 2025*





### A Vessel for the Now

The para-pedagogical offers a theory and a practice of adjacency, or rather, it proposes a potent position of *beside*. It seeks to be a practice of resistance and a framework for transformation that emerges through relation, particularly through time, place, and institutional entanglement.

For me, now here in Ngāmotu, the para-pedagogical continues to evolve, especially now that it has language to articulate itself. The learning and programming team does not sit within any single institution. It wraps around them. We report not to curators or exhibition-makers exclusively, but to the Director, Cultural Experiences—a structure that reflects a para-position. This adjacency is what allows learning to function with sovereignty, intentionality and with care. It invites each team member to ask: *How do I meet the Other? How do I plan and prioritise without losing sight of reciprocal responsibility? How do I measure, and what do I measure? How do I contribute with purpose?* By holding the container lightly and by offering trust, the para-pedagogical makes room for discomfort, agitation, opacity, and emergence to be part of our collective learning. In doing so, it reminds us that flourishing is never finished but remains a continuous fermentation of possibility.

This is the world of confluence, experience, and context in which the para-pedagogical thrives, today—a *vessel for the now* in terribly trying times. It is a mode of enquiry—a slow, situated, critical, and relational practice that resists hierarchies of form and insists on the value of embodied and dialogical learning. It is an approach that decentres the exhibition, reclaims pedagogy as a vital cultural force, and invites institutions to re-world themselves from the ground of relation rather than the walls of display and the stores of collections.

*The para-pedagogical is a reorienting presence.*

*It leads, listens, and stays.*

*It co-authors meaning.*

*It holds institutions accountable—and gently asks more of them.*

*What, then, does it liberate?*

- *It liberates pedagogy from orbiting the exhibition.* It frees learning from the need to contextualise objects or explain artworks. Instead, it opens pedagogy as its own site of enquiry—one that values pause, mismatch, repetition, and what remains unrecorded.
- *It liberates time.* While institutions often move with urgency towards openings, deliverables, and outcomes, the para-pedagogical approach holds a slower tempo. A soaked tempo. One attuned to the pace of trust, repair, and relation.
- *It liberates relations.* Hospitality is not aesthetic here—it is infrastructural. Tea before questions. Food before forms. Stories before interpretation. These are not gestures of comfort. They are methodologies of care. They shift the terms under which knowledge appears.
- *It liberates institutional intent.* Held adjacent to the exhibition, the para-pedagogical asks different questions. Not: *What will we show?* But: *What do we need to ask? Whom do we stand with? What forms of knowledge do we uphold? What does care look like here?* These are not rhetorical questions. They are operational. They shape timelines, resourcing, and governance. They ferment the very logic of the institution.

These liberations—of form, time, relation, and intent—ferment together. They leak into one another. They destabilise old logics and open new ones. And through this, something

else becomes possible: the arrival of knowledges otherwise, of practices and bodies long held at the margin. As the place where institutions begin again.

The challenge now is to build infrastructures—not just events—that embed para-logics as an institutional method. The structure at the Govett-Brewster and Puke Ariki offers one such vessel.

A pedagogical ecology shaped like a fermentation jar.

*Porous.*

*Protected.*

*Not sealed, but held.*

Inside: knowledge is slow.

*Agitation is a method.*

*Salt and storyline the walls.*

*It is dark enough to allow transformation.*

*Warm enough to sustain it.*

*This is not a model to scale. It is a method to sit with. A vessel for the now.*

*Bubbles rise. They burst. Something changes.*

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## Figure list

### Figure 1

Smith, L. (2023). *Fermentation Intelligences* [Digital drawing].

### Figure 2

Smith, L. (2024). *Para-Pedagogy (after Helguera)* [Map].

### Figure 3

Smith, L. (2025). *Personal documentation from Thinking Bodies. Fermenting Worlds*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery | Len Lye Centre [Photograph].

### Figure 4

Smith, L. (2025). *Personal documentation from the Lalaga Talanoa* [Photographs].