

## **Working with Soil: Craft, design and coactive power**

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***Traces from the Anthropocene: Working with Soil at Research Pavilion  
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***Working with Soil in Ceramics Facing the New exhibition at Espoo  
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Craft and design contribute to the making of the world. It also offers openings for understanding, making visible and taking action regarding the consequences of consumption for the natural environment. The complex ecological issues we are faced with demand the use of our domain-specific knowledge in ethical ways and that we work across disciplinary borders to think and act together. This report looks at craft and design's potential in environmental discourse. This is done by presenting three interdisciplinary craft and design projects that engage with ecological concerns in the context of soil. The projects aim to contribute to ethical considerations through the skill and knowledge of craft making. In doing so, they offer ways to enact power, a "space of appearance", as articulated by Hannah Arendt (1998, 199). Thus, they can be considered practical exercises of political thought.

The three projects are conducted by a Finland-based group of craft practitioners that calls themselves the *Working with Soil* group. The group is formed and led by Maarit Mäkelä and Riikka Latva-Somppi, both of whom also situate their work in the field of craft research. Maarit Mäkelä has a long history in ceramic art. Similarly, Riikka Latva-Somppi, the author of this report, has a background in ceramics and solid experience as a practising glass artist. Following the principles of practice-led research, I use my situated knowledge to produce insights from within the creative field. Thus, I have also participated in planning and executing the projects.

Since establishing the *Working with Soil* group in 2019, the group has formed a distinct methodology to engage with environmental concerns. Their work targets specific geological environments by combining scientific facts with knowledge from ceramic and glass craft practice. Their activities build on collaboration and open-endedness. They invite other craft and design practitioners, artists, scientists, and the public to join them in exploring the relationality of humans and soil. The group co-operates with established institutes, such as environmental organisations and museums. The processes are deliberated through public action, which takes the form of exhibitions, academic publications, conference presentations and lecturing. Each exhibition displays creative outcomes, namely ceramic art and evolving processes, and acts as a catalyst for new projects and interdisciplinary collaborations. The processual elements are organized in the exhibitions as ‘laboratories’ where ongoing work and events occur in the form of open studios and fieldwork as well as talks and other public events, such as workshops or discursive events. This report introduces three *Working with Soil* projects over the period 2019-2021, focusing on the ongoing processes shared with the audiences.

The group's activities rise from the fundamental idea of artistic research that “does not begin with a predetermined set of questions or assumptions but arises from particular situations or contexts being investigated” (Frayling 1997, 22 in Slager 2015, 31). In artistic research, the artist, designer or craft person, is a reflective practitioner who continuously looks back on their activities in a self-critical way (Hannula et al. 2005, 10; Schön 1983). As research led by practice, the projects may be guided by theoretical frameworks, but even more so, they lead to reflections with thinkers often situated in fields other than craft and design, as is the case with Hannah Arendt. Her concept of the human condition with its three fundamental categories, ‘labour’, ‘work’ and ‘action’ (Arendt 1998), can help bridge the connection between crafting and the consequences of consumption in the context of soil. While ‘labour’ and ‘work’ are attached to ideas of the earth and the world, the concept of ‘action’ is beneficial in reflecting on the practical engagement with the environmental concerns.

### **Caring for soil through worldmaking**

Arendt (1998, 7, 97-98) explains that we are citizens of the earth participating in its circularity as biological beings (through ‘labour’), like other animal species. The idea of humans as citizens of land communities was developed by environmental philosopher and conservationist Aldo Leopold. He created a ‘land ethic’ in the understanding that we are members of land communities, able to care for and respect our fellow members such as worms, plants and mushrooms, and the community itself (Leopold 2020, 192). According to Arendt (1998, 2,137), humans differ from other animals by being creators of the artificial world, which we construct (through ‘work’) to maintain human life and protect us from natural forces.

Art belongs to the realm of the world (Arendt 1998, 167-169), and undoubtedly so does craft and design. “The work of our hands” fabricate the “unending variety of things whose

total sum constitutes the human artifice” (ibid., 136). Building houses and making objects and things requires consuming natural resources such as oil, minerals, metals, and water<sup>1</sup>. Through human actions, metals and minerals are subtracted and redeposited. In high concentrations, heavy metals become pollution, but also in low amounts, they may affect the life of fragile organisms of land, air, and water. Arendt (ibid., 139) states that “an element of violation and violence is present in all fabrication, and *homo faber*, the creator of the human artifice, has always been a destroyer of nature”.

Paul Voice (2013, 186), a scholar of moral and political philosophy, points out that Arendt’s philosophy combines the existential question of what it means to be human with practical engagement with environmental challenges. Although Arendt’s conception of worldmaking can be conceived of as anthropocentric, she has a dual approach towards unconstrained consumption of natural materials. On the one hand, she points out that humans must build worlds. Thus, it is inevitable that they will extract natural resources. Not to do so would mean to cease to be human (ibid.). On the other hand, she indicates in her essay *The Crisis of Culture* (Arendt 1961, 211-212; see also Chapman 2007, 440; Voice 2013, 186) that we do not need to subject nature to the dominion of humans in doing so. She reminds us that the word culture [*colere*] originally meant cultivating, taking care, dwell, tend and preserve. Therefore, she suggests an attitude of loving care towards nature as the “intercourse of (hu)man(s) with nature in the sense of cultivating and tending nature until it becomes fit for human habitation”.

The third fundamental element of the human condition is ‘action’ (Arendt 1998, 7): the capacity to think and act together. For her, this is the condition of all political life. She notes that art and politics are interrelated because they both belong to the public realm (1961, 218). As a thinker of her time, Arendt focuses on the final artefacts over making the processual nature of art public. She states that artistic outcomes (objects) are similar to political words and deeds in that they need a public space for their appearance. By contrast with the creative results that need to be made visible, she proposes that the work processes of an artist or a craft person should be private; to create new things in the world, creative practitioners must work in isolation, and even in concealment from the public (ibid., 217). However, the strategy of the *Working with Soil* group builds on the contemporary understanding that opening the creative processes to aesthetic evaluation and critical viewing may be used as a tool for artistic expression and communication. The group explicitly plans the exhibitions in a way that physical outcomes are shown, following the more traditional function of an exhibition; however, it is also essential in the exhibition setups to create spaces that enable a coactive ‘space of appearance’<sup>2</sup> – to

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1 Anne Chapman (2007) discusses building and preserving the world and its consequences to the natural systems in her article *The Ways That Nature Matters: The World and the Earth in the Thought of Hannah Arendt*

2 As explained in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (d’Entreves 2019) a ‘space of appearance’ is not a physical space nor does it automatically arise when people assemble. A ‘space of appearance’ establishes itself from speech and action when people gather together.

provide opportunities for sharing and reiterating the stories that are told. Similarly, the group aims to evidence the ‘power’<sup>3</sup> of craft by openly showing their working processes.

The common mediator for the three projects at hand is soil, the source for minerals and metals; Soil is natural matter and belongs to the earth, together with water, wind and all that is alive. Local clay soil has provided potters with the material for their practice for thousands of years. As soon as natural soil is extracted to be used as material for making artefacts, it becomes part of the artificial world. The mineral content of the local geology also defines ceramic outcomes. For example, iron-rich clay produces reddish-brown colours when fired and lowers the firing temperature required for turning it into ceramics.

In the *Working with Soil* group, the idea of loving care attaches to ‘action’. Caring for something is more than an attitude or idea. It calls for practical actions of care.<sup>4</sup> Caring, dwelling, tending, and conservation are central ideas in craft making. A craft person understands the value of their tools and materials and carefully attends them throughout the crafting processes. For example, a ceramist handles their clay material with great attention because careless handling might cause cracks or distortion in the finished artefact. Care is also seen in knowing the qualities of clays in order to treat them according to their needs. Through the projects, we expand the care thinking and practices of caring for the clay material as a medium to caring for it as natural matter, that is, soil, its communities and interrelations.

We are aware of our involvement in the human-centric disruption in the environment as a ceramic practice also consumes earth’s minerals and metals. Clay is essentially fired earth, and ceramists use earth metals to alter the colour, flux and shine of ceramic glazes. Furthermore, firing ceramics consumes energy and causes emissions. Addressing the relationality of humans and the environment in the context of soil with ceramics’ practice makes us intimately involved with what we were debating (Latva-Somppi et al. 2020, 5). We believe that making visible the physical and practical acts of caring that stem from our situated understanding of how we consume, live, and create in the world, may have ethical and political importance (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). When design (and craft) mediates on how and by whom resources used and to whose benefit, we engage in the politics of sustainability, highlighting that questions of sustainability concern both humans and non-humans (Mazé 2013, 85, 89; see also Latva-Somppi, in press).

Next, I will present the three projects by the *Working with Soil* group. The projects are 1) *Traces from the Anthropocene: Working with Soil*, which was conducted during the Research Pavilion in Venice in 2019, 2) the *Soil Matters* exhibition at the Design Museum Helsinki 2020-2021, and 3) an ongoing project at *Ceramics Facing the New* exhibition at

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3 According to Arendt, power is the capacity to act together for public and political purpose (d’Entreves 2019). Power arises from collective engagement for a common purpose.

4 Feminist science and technology studies scholar Maria Puig de la Bellacasa has discussed the ethics and politics of care in her book *Matters of Care* (2017). She has also published widely on issues related to soil and soil care.

the Espoo Museum of Modern Art EMMA. These projects demonstrate a caring attitude towards the environment and show that collaborations across different disciplines matter. Also, I will highlight the co-operation with established art and design institutions in increasing craft projects' societal impact.

### **Traces from the Anthropocene: Working with Soil**

The *Working with Soil* group was established to conduct the craft research project *Traces from the Anthropocene: Working with Soil*<sup>5</sup> for *Research Pavilion #3*<sup>6</sup>, which was organised in the context of the Venice Biennale in 2019. The project aimed to draw attention to the relationality of humans and their environment. The focus was on the consequences of human actions for the local geology in the Venice Lagoon area. The project was carried out in collaboration with the soil contamination specialists from the Finnish Environment Institute SYKE.

The project *Traces from the Anthropocene: Working with Soil* explored site-specific geologies in the Venice Lagoon area through the material and knowledge gained in ceramic and glass craft practice (Latva-Somppi & Mäkelä 2020; Latva-Somppi et al. 2020). Soil contamination research methods were implemented in the craft practice to uncover the truth of the soil's present state and allow the craft practitioners to understand the soil through unfamiliar means. First, the group studied the anthropogenic contamination of the Venice Lagoon area through existing environmental research and scientific research methods. Soil and sediment samples from specific sites were collected [FIGURE 1], then the samples were analysed for heavy metals in the Aalto University's laboratory of Chemical and Metallurgical Engineering. After that, the soils were processed further in the ceramic laboratory of Aalto University. The samples were milled and fired to discover their aesthetic and functional qualities as a ceramic material [FIGURE 2]. Finally, the soil that was milled into clay slip was used as an artistic medium to make artefacts.

FIGURE 1. Collecting sediment samples from a canal in Venice. Photo: Pauliina Purhonen. FIGURE 2. Display of unprocessed and processed soil samples and ceramic test pieces in Research Pavilion #3. Photo: Tzuyu Chen.

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5 The *Working with Soil* group for the project *Traces from the Anthropocene: Working with Soil*: Maarit Mäkelä, Riikka Latva-Somppi, Catharina Kajander, Özgü Gündeşlioğlu. Assistants: Tzuyu Chen, Pauliina Purhonen. Analyses: Hannu Revitzer, Aalto CHEM.

6 The *Research Pavilion* is a biannual event which has been organised by the University of the Arts Helsinki since 2015.



The *Earth Laboratory* was set up on-site to gather together the activities that took place during the high season of the Research Pavilion in summer 2019. The *Earth Laboratory* was surrounded by various soil and sediment samples, test pieces, maps, research diaries and photographs that depicted the research process. The evolving creative work was opened for public viewing. The audiences could follow how large clay vessels were coiled from local brick clay and then painted with the contaminated soil [FIGURE 3]. They were also invited to work with clay alongside the research team members during the eight weeks that the *Earth Laboratory* was open. The public was encouraged to share their thoughts on environmental matters and local stories concerning pollution. The display of sites where the samples had been gathered, analysis charts, and the processed and fired soil samples that showed the transformation of soil acted as a material narrative that helped encourage discussion [FIGURE 4]. Additionally, the group arranged a discursive event with a soil contamination specialist to discuss soil contamination in Europe and the site-specific explorations on the Venetian soil.



FIGURE 3. Maarit Mäkelä painting female figures on the large vessels with the processed soil and sediment samples. Photo: Riikka Latva-Somppi. FIGURE 4. Discussing with the exhibition audience. Photo: Maarit Mäkelä.

In this case, the ‘space of appearance’ was a space for dwelling with the environmental matters together. Speech and deed were present but not in the form of protest. Instead, it was accompanied by the silent, repetitive crafting of the artefacts, which tied the environmental facts close to the practice of human crafting. Referrals to the history of culture were proposed in several ways: The clay pots in process were intentionally connected to ancient pottery through the forms, materials and techniques used. Similarly, the inspiration for the painted designs was found in human portrayals from the Venetian museums. Furthermore, the exhibition space where the *Earth Laboratory* was situated was in an old monastery, surrounded by brick architecture made from the same fired local clay that was used for the crafting.

The scientific facts regarding the contaminated soil used for painting the figures contrasted the traditions of crafting and the aesthetic nature of the objects with the present state of the environment. A ‘factual truth’ always suggests that things could be

otherwise (Voice 2013, 190). We also understood that scientific truths might be political. For example, the soil contamination guidelines define how much environmental pollution is allowed for using soil for specific purposes, such as building residential or industrial areas. Thus, the guidelines are based on facts but also on mutual consent (ibid.).

### **Soil Matters**

The second project, the *Soil Matters*<sup>7</sup> exhibition in Design Museum Helsinki in 2020, examined whether the impact of craft and design could be amplified by bringing together projects that explored the interrelations of humans and soil (Latva-Somppi, in press) [FIGURE 5]. The exhibition presented nine experimental design projects that explored the materiality of soil and how it is interwoven with human activity. The exhibition works could be divided into three categories, which were 1) natural soils, 2) anthropogenic geology, and 3) collective efforts to care for soils. The seed project for the exhibition was *Traces from the Anthropocene: Working with Soil*, with its focus on geology affected by humans. The exhibition highlighted the role of the design industry; Design can have a substantial impact on the contamination and transformation of the land in its disposition to steer consumer habits. Moreover, the exhibition explored the idea of soil as a community of human and non-human members (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2015).

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<sup>7</sup> The *Soil Matters* exhibition was selected from Design Club Call for the Design Museum Helsinki in 2020. The call sought proposals that created new content for the museum exhibitions under the theme 'Materiality'. The exhibition was curated by Maarit Mäkelä and Riikka Latva-Somppi. Artists and designers at the exhibition: Tzuyu Chen (TW), Annelie Grimwade Olofsson (SE/DK), Özgü Gündeşlioğlu (TR), Catharina Kajander (FI), Riikka Latva-Somppi (FI), Maarit Mäkelä (FI), Pauliina Purhonen (FI), Erna Skúladóttir (IS), Unknown Fields Division (Liam Young & Kate Davies) (UK), Un/Making Studio (Åsa Ståhl & Kristina Lindström) (SE). *Working with Soil* group for *Soil Laboratory*: Maarit Mäkelä, Riikka Latva-Somppi, Catharina Kajander, Tzuyu Chen and research assistant Sara Hulkkonen for the project *Un/making Soil Communities/Nuutajärvi*





FIGURE 5. General view of the *Soil Matters* exhibition. Photo: Paavo Lehtonen.

One of the nine projects was *Soil Laboratory*<sup>8</sup> belonging to the third category of caring for soils together. It was set at the heart of the exhibition. Following the idea of the *Earth Laboratory*, *Soil Laboratory*, too, consisted of several activities that were designed to open the creative research processes to the public (Latva-Somppi, in press). One element was an open studio, where the *Working with Soil* group conducted their creative work. During the exhibition, three interlocking projects evolved in the laboratory: 1) One of the exhibition's projects, *Un/making Soil Communities* extended to the areas of the local glass industry in Nuutajärvi (Latva-Somppi et al. 2021, 2) *Critically Endangered Species* drew attention to the other-than-human species who are dependent on the wellbeing of soil, and 3) *Soil Stories* invited the audience to send in soil samples they had collected themselves.

The public could follow the coiling and painting of the large vessels using the soil samples that were sent from different locations in Finland [FIGURES 6 and 7]. Also, research tasks that drew on science were carried out. Such were, for example, the public soil scanning events, where a geologist measured the heavy metal content of the different soils [FIGURE 8] and a phytoremediation experiment where attempts were made to clean soil that was contaminated by the glass industry with the help of specific plants [FIGURE 9]. The *Soil Laboratory's* projects were carried out in collaboration with the Finnish

<sup>8</sup> <https://soil-laboratory.aalto.fi>, accessed June 24, 2021

Environment Institute SYKE, Geological Survey of Finland and the Association for Rural Culture and Education.



FIGURE 6. Unfired and fired ceramic test pieces from Finnish soils. Photo: Tzuyu Chen. FIGURE 7. Maarit Mäkelä and Catharina Kajander painting critically endangered species on clay vessels. Photo: Tzuyu Chen.



FIGURE 8. Geologist Maarit Saresma measuring heavy metals from soil during the public soil scanning event. Photo: Minni Soverila / Design Museum Helsinki. FIGURE 9. Sunflowers, soybeans and alfalfa growing in Nuutajärvi soil. Photo: Tzuyu Chen.

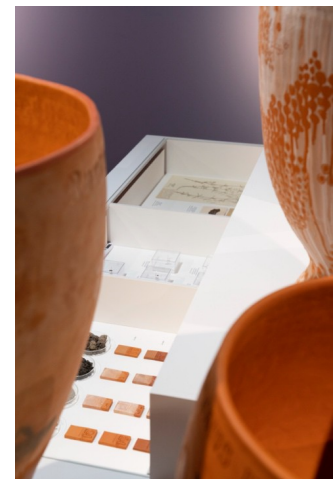
*Soil Laboratory* also acted as a place for sharing thoughts on environmental concerns and ideas on new actions. It enabled discussions around soil during the exhibition, housing as it did visitors from environmental organisations, artists working with similar issues, university students in the area of design and members of the public (Latva-Somppi, in press). The museum visitors could also engage with soil materials and creative processes in the *Painting with Soil* workshops, where participants could use the processed soils to paint on clay tiles made of Finnish red earthenware while learning about the local qualities of soils. Additionally, a lunch talk on the exhibition's themes, curatorial tours and a public lecture by geologist Maarit Saresma on clay soils in the capital area of Finland was organised in the context of the exhibition.

## An ongoing artistic research project on local soil

In the spirit of openly sharing ongoing processes, I will lastly introduce the *Working with Soil* projects that are currently displayed at Espoo Museum of Modern Art EMMA in the exhibition *Ceramics Facing the New*. This exhibition, too, combines displaying finished artefacts and evolving craft practice. Moreover, it builds on the previous project and continues the collaboration with the Finnish Environment Institute SYKE. The finished artefacts on show are those created in the *Soil Laboratory* during the *Soil Matters* exhibition: *Critically Endangered Species*.

The exhibition addresses the themes of fracture and reconstruction – humans’ relationship with soil, the environment and each other through ceramic art. It also highlights the need for connectedness, presence, and crafting in the current ecological crisis. Twelve ceramic artists and two artist groups, one of which is the *Working with Soil*<sup>9</sup> group, were invited to produce work for the exhibition. The ceramic pieces of *Critically Endangered Species* form an installation with specimens of the authentic species represented in the artefacts [FIGURES 10 and 11]. The rare and fragile specimens are on loan from the Finnish Museum of Natural History. Placing the tiny and modest-looking specimens by the large pots that depict the species enlarged hundreds of times addresses the role of aesthetics in environmental acts. Humans pay attention to species that are colourful, large, cute or otherwise visible. This may influence the value and selection of the species that are in need of protection (Saito 2017, 142).

FIGURES 10 and 11. The large pots of *Critically Endangered Species* depict Finnish species that are in danger of extinction. The work is displayed with specimens of the authentic species together with soil samples and ceramic test pieces in the Espoo Museum of Modern Art EMMA. Photos: Ari Karttunen / EMMA 2021.



9 The *Working with Soil* group for *Ceramics Facing the New* exhibition: Maarit Mäkelä, Riikka Latva-Somppi, Catharina Kajander and Özgü Gündeşlioğlu. Assistants: Amedeo Martines and Julius Rinne. Collaborative partner institutions are the Finnish Environment Institute SYKE and the Finnish Museum of Natural History. <https://emmamuseum.fi/en/exhibitions/ceramics-renewed/> accessed June 25, 2021.

At the time of writing this report, the group has recently launched a new open-ended artistic research project on local Espoo soils. This time, the craft practitioners will study the local environment using the method of walking. During the walks, soil materials are gathered to be then processed and used as an artistic medium [FIGURES 12 and 13]. The collaboration extends to other fields of art, inviting sound artists Noora Kauppila and Mikko H. Haapoja to explore the environment through soil. The walks and other creative processes are carefully documented, and an installation of the evolving project will progress in the exhibition space. One month is reserved for building new ceramic work in the museum's open studio space. The artefacts will be again painted with the processed soil samples. A discursive event with environmental specialists and *Working with Soil* group members is planned for the end of the exhibition in summer, 2022.

FIGURE 12. Exploring soil in Nuuksio National Park in Espoo. Photo: Amedeo Martines. FIGURE 13. Ceramists and sound artists experimenting with processed Espoo soils together. Photo: Maarit Mäkelä.



Design researchers Adam Thorpe and Lorraine Gamman (2021, 249-250) point out that Arendt's idea of power includes both power as a process and power as a product (speech and action). In both cases, power is coactive. Power emerges with people in proximity and plurality, thus highlighting individuals that act together for a common purpose. However, institutional power can also be experienced as a coercive power, power over people (ibid.). This is true also with art institutions such as museums. Through their authority, museums can affect how craft and design are understood (Zetterlund 2013, 49). In the three projects, however, we used institutional power to increase the visibility of our actions. Hence, it was coactive power. The first project was established in the Research Pavilion, in the setting of the Venice Biennale; The second project took place in one of Finland's national museums, The Design Museum Helsinki; The third project is set in another highly valued art institution, the Espoo Museum of Modern Art EMMA. Consequently, we are aware that the participation of environmental institutions such as the Finnish Environment Institute SYKE and the Geological Survey of Finland not only enables practical engagement with the research tasks but also increases credibility in conducting interdisciplinary research. This also applies to the affiliated academic institution, Aalto University, with its multidisciplinary affluence.

## **Conclusion**

I have presented three projects that exercise the politics of sustainability, not through protest, but through making visible the acts of concern and care. The three projects have gathered craft practitioners, designers, artists, scientists, environmental organisations, and museums to demonstrate shared concerns on ecological matters in the context of soil. We have opened the processes and discussions to the public and extended the deliberations to education by sharing them through university teaching and museum pedagogy. The projects demonstrate a three-step strategy that allows politics to be enacted through craft (Latva-Somppi et al. 2021). First, going to specific sites result in scientific data that state the ‘factual truths’; second, inviting people to actively participate in these processes that are both cognitive and aesthetic carry a possibility for ‘coactive power’ and affect; third, involving established environmental institutes as well as universities and art and design museums using ‘institutional power’ to make these processes visible.

With these exercises, we have attempted to ‘stay with the trouble’, as suggested by science scholar and feminism theorist Donna Haraway (2016). Arendt’s ideas on the human condition aids in articulating the unease that has been present in crafting artefacts while discussing the consequences of consumption in the context of soil. On the one hand, we have relied on Aldo Leopold’s (2020) environmental ethic to gear thinking towards soil communities and our roles in them along with responsibilities towards other community members. On the other hand, Arendt’s concept indicates explicitly that as we “live on the earth and inhabit the world” (Arendt 1998, 7), we can never distance ourselves entirely from a utilitarian attitude towards nature. The Arendtian approach defines thinking and acting in collaboration as an essential part of a meaningful life (Voice 2013, 179). Following this idea, we have relied on action, engaged others to act in concert, and made our practices public.

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