I will here describe collaging – an art-based method that I have used and developed in my doctoral research and postdoctoral life, a distinction that is relevant for the point this chapter makes on empowerment. Empowerment, as I understand it here, refers to a psychological and social process that enhances my (and others’) agency. It produces a strong sense that I have the power to make a difference and/or change the world around me. I will go through four facets of collaging explaining how I see it not only as a research method but also as more than that, a method and a practice that empowers. I lay out how collaging can be used in and out of classrooms of IR/world politics/global politics.

I will explain at length the first way in which I have found collage empowering, which is at the personal level in research. This relates closely to my experiences as a feminist scholar in a particular national context, namely Finnish IR. The second empowering feature draws from and aims to counter the same source, but adds a collective dimension to my personal experiences. Third, I will introduce how I’ve used collaging in the classroom and how it can be empowering for students. The fourth and last form of empowerment recognises the interrelated and overlapping nature of art-making, activism, scholarly work, and the personal and the collective. Together these parts form an open-ended collage-like discussion, through which I hope to provide inspiration for the reader to find her own way of breaking out of
disciplinary moulds and daring use creativity in order to change the world for the better.

**Personal empowerment or how I became an artist during the dissertation research process**

Feminists have for long proclaimed that the personal is political, and Cynthia Enloe expanded the phrase to cover global politics also: ‘the personal is international’ (Enloe, 1989, p. 196). Both of these phrases also work the other way around: political is personal and international is personal. Not only is the international personal, but IR research is also personal in many ways. Related to this, I discuss elsewhere how data generation intertwined with my everyday social media use during my dissertation project (Särnä, 2018). There I argue that my researcher identity and the ways in which it manifests on social media turned into data generation method, which differs from how researchers often (are encouraged to) use social media – for promoting our research and engaging in public discussions as experts. In this chapter, I try to get at how IR research is personal in ways that are sometimes hard to put into words, because they are affective and embodied and this is also precisely why it is important to see how research can be a source of empowerment.

My Alma Mater’s mission statement is to ‘educat[e] visionaries who understand the world and change it’.\(^1\) Were one to take this mission seriously and not just as a neoliberal marketing slogan to ignore or resist, one could think about how understanding the world and changing it requires criticality, which is to examine and interrogate the world through critical lenses and question taken-for-granted
assumptions. Furthermore, criticality requires empowerment – a sense of self-determination and that one is in a position to (attempt) to make changes – and vice versa, self-determination requires criticality. Academic disciplines prepare us to fit a mould. To do something differently, to break out of that mould, takes bravery (or stupidity – as the line between the two can be fleeting). For example, which is what I came to do, to embrace arts-based methods in IR research in an environment where even just doing feminist research is seen as a bit too much.

I came to collaging as a research method through my artistic practice. However, for a long time I did not see myself as an artist, although I did receive basic education in visual arts when I was young (see also Särmä, 2014, p. 95). I didn’t think I had the skills or the talent to be an artist, unlike some others in my peer group. This is partly because artistry is also tied to formal societal recognition; Master’s level art education (which I do not have) ensures this recognition, while untrained artists are often labelled ‘outsider artists’. At the time of writing this, I’m starting to get recognition from the art community in Finland, due to having an installation at a major exhibition. Calling myself an artist came before the formal recognition, however, and owning this identity emboldened me to do artistic work in the doctoral dissertation.

Recognition from others is what enables me to continue to do the work. This has taught me how much making art and being an artist is a communal activity, which goes some ways against the cultural ideas that we have about artists, who work alone and whose talent and brilliance can only be accounted to themselves. Because I have been lucky in finding the right kind of people to work with, making art and doing activist work has also taught me how much easier it is to be creative in an
enthusiastically supportive environment (which academia in my experience often is not, see e.g. Thesis Whisperer, 2013).

There was something about the research process of my doctoral dissertation and something about being a feminist that made me an artist while working in a field that is conventionally not very open to artistic endeavours or feminist approaches. In a way it was a bit backward. It wasn’t until I had already earned my doctoral degree that I started reading more about arts-based methods in social sciences. It is a field that has been growing fast in the last decade or so, and the art forms used in art-based research are wide ranging. I use the word backward to describe the process to emphasise that not all research processes follow any kind of conventional research logic of pre-meditated, well-considered research design that then increases the chances of producing good data for solid analysis.

Every research project is different, but we are trained to think they can all follow similar paths. Particularly the way in which funding proposals are written creates a fiction that every research process can be linear and neatly divided into manageable work packages. This leaves little room for a sense of wonder, for serendipity, for creativity. Many novelists when describing their writing process state that the characters start to live their own life. Research projects, too, have lives of their own and we should listen more carefully where they want to take us. Sometimes that can be nowhere. (Of course, this is all a problem for the neoliberal academy where time is limited and everyone should just publish, publish and publish.)
As time has passed since I completed my doctoral project and I have been engaging more and more in activist work, I’ve also come to realise that for me it is useful to follow a philosophy of ‘doing first and thinking later’. This philosophy is useful for keeping my creativity alive. During my studies I tended to read everything I could find before writing about a topic. This often led to a situation where my thinking was much ahead of my ability to write. In other words, I could already criticise my own writing and arguments in all kinds of ways, but could not produce a text that could address those criticisms. This more often than not left me stuck and unable to write. In short, knowledge can be disempowering. It is difficult to find your own voice if you are constantly overwhelmed with all the knowledge you are not able to quite grasp. In academic discussions, in classrooms and outside of them, certainty is the way to manifest expertise and this requires ‘getting things right’. There is hardly room for uncertainty even when we speak the language of openness.

The modes of academic expression and the forms of writing also feed into these feelings as they tend to push out all uncertainty. I started to feel that I was a victim of ‘a benign and tenacious lifelong educational socialisation process that favoured conventional modes of teaching and learning’ (Magolda, 1999, p. 210). I felt constrained by the academic conventions prevalent in the field, which made me claim in my dissertation that training and professionalisation into IR murders creative sensibilities (Särmä, 2014, p. 40). I felt like there was no room for creativity and playfulness, which I craved. As a result, I needed to break free from some conventions and customise the dissertation process to fit my needs.
Collaging

‘Collage is the customiser’s dream and reality. It traverses boundaries without setting up exclusive enclaves’ (Sylvester, 2009, p. 187). We can customise ‘artworks, consumer items (cars), academic fields, or institutions’ (Ibid.). I made the research process my own; I customised the dissertation format to fit what I needed to say and what I needed to politicise. Disturbing taken-for-granted divisions is always a political act. By making collages and including them in the dissertation, I joyfully carnivalised research and academic writing. Key here was my aim to disturb the division between serious and silly.

First of all, examining internet memes and other parody images in a serious context of nuclear proliferation (as I did in the dissertation) may seem frivolous or trivial. The memes can be seen as something silly, everyday entertainment, not something with any political significance and thus not something an IR scholar should be paying serious attention to. However, the banal everyday stuff can reveal something more serious, such as the gendered and sexualised meaning structures that help to uphold the contemporary nuclear order (see Särmä, 2014, 2016). Furthermore, as Cynthia Enloe teaches us, when we do not pay attention to issues often deemed as trivial, we miss a significant part of what constitutes world politics. To counter this oversight, feminist curiosity advises us to pay attention to those things others call trivial or natural (Enloe, 2004, p. 220). Many power structures rely on their seeming naturalness and normality, through feminist curiosity what is taken for granted as normal and natural can be made strange thus revealing the power structures at play in the everyday, locally and globally (Enloe, 2004, p. 2, 2007, p.1). Feminist curiosity is
an ‘experimental assemblage’ that ‘simultaneously extracts information from and disrupts worlds’, it is ‘an act that experiments with concepts and empirical sites, and connects devices in imaginative ways with the purpose of disrupting dominant forms of knowledge and practice’ (Aradau and Huysmans, 2014, pp. 610–611).

Similarly, collaging (a visual mode of feminist curiosity) disturbs the division between the personal and the public when relying on a highly personal process that utilised artistic insights and intuition while pushing for a public recognition that this is a relevant mode of research. Moreover, as Linda Åhäll argues, the personal – emotional, affective, and embodied insights – are the bases of feminist methodology when ‘moments of affective dissonance spark feminist curiosity’ and generate ‘feminist questions about gender, agency, and political violence’ (Åhäll, 2018, p. 38).

The politics of collaging are also anti-illustrational in the sense that collaging inverts or at least shifts considerably the ‘normal’ priority of text over image (cf. Armstrong, 2013, p. 23). Drawing from Aradau and Huysmans’ categorisation of feminist curiosity as a method-as-act rather than method-as-device (Aradau and Huysmans, 2014), I would posit collaging in the former category as well. Unlike conventional academic arguments, which tend to foreclose other possible interpretations, art-based methods such as collaging open up multiple possible interpretations simultaneously. In a similar vein, feminist curiosity is about questions and questioning, rather than certain answers and explanations. Therefore, collaging as a visual form of feminist curiosity actively engages with uncertainty and messiness instead of pretending that by using a Method a phenomenon can be made wholly coherent through analysis.
Feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed wrote a book called *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), which brings forth many familiar experiences and feelings. Living a feminist life is not always an active choice – to me it feels inevitable rather. There is no other way of living I could think for myself. Sometimes I have wished that I could have chosen differently, that it would have been easier to live a different kind of academic life in Finnish IR. Maybe research something else, using some other approach that is not seen as overly political and thus problematic. But do we choose our topics and approaches or do they come to us through something else other than a rational choice?

Rational choice would be to engage in research orientations, which were not actively disciplined out of the local IR, or marginalised. This would make life easier and career prospects better. Why try to do something that those around you will not be convinced about?

Making collages seemed so far out of the academic performances of seriousness. What is more, using bold colours and glitter in the collages were my means of standing the ground and not giving in to disciplining attempts. If I wasn’t heard in the first place, why try to play the game in the terms of the disciplinarians? Why not play around on my terms and try to find other ways of doing and being?

**Collage as a research method**

As I mentioned I came to collaging somewhat randomly, not through studying art-based methods but rather as a conceptualisation. Collage or collaging
was a way of thinking and theorising, not a way of making art. Collage-thinking as introduced to IR by Christine Sylvester (2009, 2007) is theoretical and thematic mode of thinking. *Theoretical collaging* allows for a discussion to emerge between different schools of thought despite and through disciplinary barriers and thus the camp structure that seems to be a defining feature of the current IR discipline can be overcome in a fruitful manner. *Thematic collaging* is a methodological experiment, which brings together seemingly separate topics and maps their ‘shadowy mutualities’. Both of these strands of collage-thinking are based on Max Ernst’s definition that the purpose of a collage ‘is to create a meeting of two distant realities on a plane foreign to them both’ (Sylvester, 2009, pp. 21, 177). Putting seemingly separate and incommensurable things together in this way can reveal new connections and things can start making sense in new ways.

The gatekeeper is an oft-mentioned figure when academics discuss writing and publishing. It is someone who we need to sufficiently convince about the relevance of our work. To be let through the gate, one needs to be able to cite relevant sources and it helps that the sources come from prominent figures in the field, such as Christine Sylvester, one of the fifty ‘key thinkers’ of IR (see Griffiths et.al., 2008, pp. 294–301). Sylvester’s conceptualisation of collaging thus serves both as a necessary anchor and a jumping-off point, for the further experimentation with visual collaging that I undertook.

In the meantime, as I was playing around with these thematic and theoretical modes of collaging in my writing, I started experimenting with making collages, as a means of visualising other people’s work. As my dissertation project was ongoing, some of
my friends successfully defended their doctoral dissertations in different fields. I had been playing around with the idea of a collage methodology, but not actually making collages until one day in August 2010 when I was sitting in on the public defence of Jan Hanska’s doctoral dissertation. The official defence outfits of the University of Tampere in all their Start Trek-like glory were just too good not to use in some way. Combined with the themes of Reagan’s Mythical America and prophetic politics this event visually and mentally sparked my imagination and pushed me to make my first collage piece (see Särmä, 2014, p. 94).

[insert Image 17.1] Figure 17.1 Saara Särmä: Hanska’s mythical Reagan, mixed-media collage, 2010

After making this first collage and a few others, it started to become clear to me that the collage methodology can suit my needs and I can start developing it in this direction that also includes making art as part of the research process and not only curating various images into the research as was the case in the previous iteration of collaging in my work.

Collaging as a methodology is an ongoing and circular process where the analysis feeds into the collage making and vice versa. The collages in the empirical chapters of my dissertating juxtapose and group images thematically. Juxtaposition and repetition are compositional techniques that I have used. The collages exaggerate certain aspects by repetition and thus make visible the analysis and conceptual frames of the text.
Collage artist Ellen Gallagher describes her work in a way that resonates:

<extract>There is the material and it has historical implications, but it is also about my own intervention in that material, my present day reading of the material – my selection and editing. The invention occurs through the selection of fragments. The edit foregrounds my own (mis)readings of the historical material. This falsification creates friction and energy. Maybe this is not a reliable archive, as densities and expansions are created through the selection, cutting, and additions. Some readings get closed down and hopefully some readings become more visible, more open. <source>(Ellen Gallagher quoted in Wilmes, 2013, p. 203)

<text_fullout>Making art is not dissimilar to research processes; IR just does not usually conceptualise research processes in terms of intuitive and aesthetic processes. There is a demand to present the research process as logical, systematic and verifiable. Because emotions and rationality are seen as binary opposites and mutually exclusive, the emotionality and intuitive nature of any research process is left unspoken in mainstream IR (for a notable exception, see Sylvester, 2011). Sungju Park-Kang makes a case for fictional IR, which ‘questions “walls” between any fixed forms of IR writing’ and can enable us to express emotions more openly’ (Park-Kang, 2014, pp. 7, 40). As Park-Kang shows throughout the methodological discussion, the lines between fact and fiction in IR have not been as clear and stable as they are often made out to be.

Narrative, auto-ethnographic, and autobiographical writing have in recent years centred the self and brought forward personal experiences as relevant sources of academic knowledge challenging conventional ways of writing IR (Park-Kang, 2014,
Along with other arts-based methods, these approaches have started carving spaces in IR that embrace creativity and imagination full on.

Writing might indeed come out of our own needs and wounds (see Inayatullah, 2011, p. 8, Park-Kang, 2014, p. 5), but I’m not sure we always know what those needs and wounds are. It might be convenient to construct a narrative afterwards that presents a clear path of a research project, of a career, of a life, but in doing so the unexpected and serendipitous nature of life may get lost. As Naeem Inayatullah writes, ‘[t]here is always something more, something unexpected, something surprising that writes back to us’ (Inayatullah, 2011, p. 8). It seems that we may be able to articulate some needs and wounds that drive us to write or to undertake particular research tasks, while some other wounds and needs stay inarticulate.

For example, I’m tempted to tell a story where I locate my choice to research issues around nuclear proliferation in my childhood fear of nuclear war. Fear and fascination often go hand in hand. Furthermore, when the tools to understand and analyse the world offered by conventional IR met the ‘sightings, sitings, and citings’ (Sylvester, 2002, p. 32) of gender inequality, frustration ensued and led me to embrace artistic methods, which in turn resulted in some successful activism in my postdoctoral life. Combining certain points in my life in a particular way can create a coherent success story, but there are always other ways of telling. And other stories.

After the fact, I think I can confidently say that I needed to turn to art-based methods because it was empowering to rediscover the artist-me in and during the dissertation
research process. The talents that I thought I lacked as a teenager when surrounded with much more talented artists-to-be, were there waiting to be discovered after all.

It was empowering to find not only my own voice, but also my own visual mode of expression. Furthermore, it was empowering to engage creatively with the uncertainties and open-endedness of research processes as I had been for a long time unsatisfied in the ways in which we are trained to become ‘serious’ academics. To be able to find playful aspects of doing research has since led me to also make various activist interventions following the philosophy of ‘doing first, thinking later’.

<head1>Collective empowerment and research process

Finland is often seen as one of the forerunners of gender equality, and by many standards it might even be true. Yet, gender equality is by no means a done deal in any sector of the Finnish society, let alone in Finnish academia. However, the myth of gender equality is so strong in Finland that the conservative government claimed in 2015 that men and women are equal. Period. This myth makes it difficult to challenge the manly hegemony of Finnish IR. Together with a strong belief in functioning meritocracy, the myth of gender equality makes anyone who dares to question the actual functioning of these ideals a problem. She, who points out the problem, becomes the problem, as Sara Ahmed has observed (e.g. Ahmed, 2017). Feminist scholars, of course, are the first ones to perceive and point out gender inequalities in our immediate working environment, which makes this particular
research orientation undesirable for those in power. Interestingly, in Political Science the hegemony of male professors has started unravelling in the last decade (Weide, 2018), while IR is still dominated by an all-male professoriate in Finland.

A few years ago, Marjaana Jauhola and I were prompted by a call for papers to start thinking academically something we had mainly been ranting about in private for the last several years with each other and other Finnish feminist IR scholars. We had been ranting about our personal experiences of being silenced or not taken seriously as ‘real IR’ scholars, having the experience that somehow our feminist theories and methods were ‘too much’, but also about seeing others not get jobs they are clearly most qualified for.

The call was for an edited volume on being an early career feminist scholar in the contemporary neoliberal university. It hit a nerve in both of us, so we put out a call to feminist IR scholars in Finland asking them to reflect their experiences in the early career (postdoctoral) stage and asking for their utopian visions. We also asked them to send alongside their textual reflections, some images that they thought would capture something about the experience and something about the utopia. (see Jauhola and Särmä, 2016).

I used some of the images and made two collages as part of the research process. One of them, the one depicting the lived realities of being an early career feminist IR scholar in Finland turned out really well. The utopia one, not so much. Perhaps dim realities are easier to visualise than utopian thinking?
Finnish IR is a special little geographic and cultural niche of IR. It’s known in the wider community of critical IR scholars as a place that produces creative cutting-edge research. Yet, all of the feminist scholars who have done the research this view is largely based on, have left IR-proper, to peace studies, development studies, gender studies, or have left academia altogether. It is evident that there currently is no room for feminist work in Finnish IR, although for a while, about a decade ago, things were different. In the chapter, we wanted to reflect on the emotional aspects of the experiences that have led to those choices of leaving IR.

Emotionality of working as a feminist (early career) scholar in Finnish IR is something that can be captured and conveyed both visually and textually, with differing effects. Thus, an alternative mode of engagement is offered to the reader by presenting a collage along with the more conventional academic text. For the respondents to our query, it was an empowering project to first of all share their experiences with us, but also to read the final product.

More often than not when faced with experiences of silencing, dismissals, and even outright harassment in the workplace, it can feel really alienating and just your personal problem. When the collective and structural nature of these issues comes to the fore it is empowering, because you feel less alone and can no longer internalise the problems as perhaps your fault as the #metoo campaign has so powerfully shown since November 2017.
Collecting personal stories and putting them together enables us to see how personal is not just personal but political. Locating common themes in the stories can help us locate structural problems around us. Making problems visible or vocalising and naming them is often the first step towards any meaningful change towards a more just world. Or a more just academia.

Change and empowerment happens through collective action. As we put it in the end of our chapter:

<extract>By recognizing the diversity of our experiences of the past and the potential future, our aim has been to create a collective snapshot of the present and the recent past for feminist IR scholars in Finland. Energies that started to flow after our initial abstract-writing and correspondence with those colleagues who participated in the data collection process of this chapter have both signaled to us that this reflective collective activity is something that could provide new feminist IR beginnings. Therefore, we have decided to take our feminism in/about IR into concrete academic activism such as documenting all-male panels, documentary storytelling, and using this text as a basis for further collegial feminist IR discussions locally and transnationally. We embrace the change – even if the change is only momentary and minimal, and at times remains invisible. <source>(Jauhola and Särmä, 2016, p. 161)

<head1>Empowering pedagogical tool
Collage making is a lovely and quite a democratic art-form, because it is at everyone’s reach. It does not require special technical skills or technical equipment. Paper, some cut out images or found scraps, and glue are all the tools you need. Scissors are useful, but the materials used can be torn by hand as well. Using different ways of working with the material results in different aesthetic effects.

I’ve introduced collaging to classrooms in different ways. All of them have worked out. It has been a matter of playful experimentation for everyone, teacher(s) and students alike. I will now recap the basic instructions I’ve used.

Often, I start with a little overview on my own work, how I came to collaging and show the collages I’ve made as part of my dissertation research, in order for the students to get some idea of what collages can look like. One could of course show collages from art history, but that may raise the expectations and make the student feel like they need to somehow be ‘real artists’ to make collages. Rather contrary to empowerment, Instagram, for example, is full of contemporary collages, so it can also be a useful source for inspiration.

The collages can be made in the classroom or they can be made at home. I have instructed the students to make collages based on a specific text or based on the contents of a course reflecting on what they learned. The instructions are always just suggestive and open ended, no strict guidelines are offered. For example, I had a group of students make collages at the end of the course on world politics and popular culture. Some made works that were akin to conventional academic posters, but some
really got their artistry on and produced pieces of art. It is clear that some students are more comfortable trying a new mode of expression in an academic setting, while others are more comfortable relying on familiar conventions.

I have not asked about students’ art background so I do not know whether some previous experience features into who is willing to experiment more and who less. It may also depend on the group composition and size as well as how students are encouraged to experiment.

Something we have noticed is that if collages are made in the classroom, the setup of the space factors into the mood and the results (see also Kangas et al., 2019). If the classroom is set up in a conventional way (rows of tables, students sitting next to each other) it does not work quite as well as setting tables in groups where students face each other. This means that they can more easily communicate when they work and see each other working.

To me, empowerment is always connected to sociality and collectivity. It is not just a matter of personal development as many women’s magazines and self-help books would want us to think. While collaging in the classroom can have everyone doing their own thing, it is at the same time a space of doing something out of the ordinary academic work together. Doing some artwork while having a discussion levels the playing field between students, in my experience. It takes the pressure off the students to be right and certain about their ideas and arguments. The playfulness of collaging opens spaces for uncertainty.
When I have instructed students to use particular text as the bases of their collages, I have also assigned a poetry exercise along with the collaging exercise. The text can be the same for everyone, or it can be something that the students themselves choose. The poetry exercise that I learned from a feminist IR scholar Elina Penttinen is quite simple: construct a poem based on the texts, using only words in the texts and trying to capture the essence of the text or the argument.

For a Master’s level course, I once had students read the Introduction to Christine Sylvester’s *Feminist Theory and International Relations in a Postmodern Era* (1994) and make a poem and a collage based on the text. When the students presented their art in class it became clear that they were really self-critical of the poetry and did not want to read it out loud, while they happily presented the collages. There was much more playfulness in the air when they talked about the collages than when they talked about the poems. I think there are more expectations when working with a textual form to get things right, as I discussed earlier in regards to my personal empowerment through collaging. We are trained to produce coherence in text and often are overwhelmed by the task.

The new, visual, mode of working allowed them to feel that playfulness while working with text is what they are used to doing all the time and thus were much more self-conscious and self-critical. This experience captured for me the possibilities of collaging to be empowering while offering a mode of resistance to the ways in which academic disciplines mould.
By way of conclusion – it’s all related

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, it has become clear to me in recent years that a useful philosophy for my activism and to some extent for academic work as well has been to act first and think later. Just doing things has led to some successes and some not-successes. I will not call the latter failures, because they are not. They are just things that have for one reason or another not amounted to much, but they have been useful experiments nevertheless. For example, the ‘Congrats, you have an all male panel!’ Tumblr-site became an internationally known phenomenon while the ‘Congrats, you have an all white panel!’ has not received similar attention, nor submissions (see also Särnä, 2016, p. 476). I think this is because the former is an easier issue to call out and to fix than the latter as the structural inequalities that result in all white panels run even deeper than those resulting in all-male panels. It is easy to call out panels in environments where gender parity (at least nearly) exists, while calling out all white panels in a white majority environment (such as established IR) can be more risky and difficult.

Together with two of my friends we founded a feminist think tank, and under its auspices we have been organising Feminist Swearing Soirées and training called School of Daring. We really did not know what would come of any of it, but after organising the first events we started realising how much both concepts are based on old feminist principles of consciousness raising. In other words, when feminists come together and share their experiences (swearing about them to a microphone at a bar or in a more professional setting), the structures of patriarchy start to appear. We start to understand that many of the issues one might have previously thought of as matters of
personality or personal problems, are actually shared experiences caused by external pressures. This understanding creates at least momentary solidarity, which is a key to change.

In order to smash the patriarchy, we need to make the structures upholding it audible and visible. Sharing experiences is effective and collaging functions in visualising the structural inequalities. In Schools of Daring we have used collaging as one tool for addressing the issues professional women face in their work environments. The process is similar to how I’ve used collaging in the classroom, just not tied to academic topics. This ranges from their professional aspirations and challenges to personal hopes, dreams and fears.

Lately I have been involved in two separate but intertwined projects that both deal with the issue of online misogyny and hate mail: The Internet of Hate and Loathing, which is a campaign built around a graphic novel by Johanna Vehkoo and Emmi Nieminen, and You’ve Got Hatemail!, which is a project by an academic collective Siitä Viis and combines art and research, and art-based research to address the phenomena of hate speech and hate mail in Finnish society. We particularly focus on hate mail that is targeted to researchers.

As one of the most well-known public feminists in Finland, I have received my share of hate mail. Although, it has been minimal compared to some other women, who have been the targets of massive hate mail campaigns, even just a few hateful messages are too many. Hate mail functions as a deterrent; it silences women and prevents them from voicing their opinions in public. There’s a long history of
attempts at silencing women who speak publicly, and historian Mary Beard traces the phenomenon back to ancient myths (Beard, 2017). Hate mail directed at women is often very sexualised. It ranges from calling someone a whore to explicit rape threats or wishes (see also Jane, 2017, p. 10). ‘I wish you were raped by a bunch of immigrants’ is one of the most common tropes of hate mail.

The further one is from the ‘norm of human’ – the able bodied straight white man, who has throughout the history of western though appeared as the figure of reason – the risk of becoming a target for hate mail campaigns is greater. The more women, the LGBTQ community, people of colour, ethnic and indigenous minorities, gender non-conforming people, disabled people intersect in any single individual, it is more likely that any public appearance or visible activism will result in that individual being the recipient of targeted hate.

Furthermore, it can prevent academics from talking about their research in public when they know what might follow. Researchers who work on issues related to gender and sexuality or migration and/or antiracism are always at risk. Critical knowledge produced by academics should be made available to the wider public, but not at a high personal cost to the scholar. The most severe hate mail campaigns target journalists and can seriously hinder their ability to do their work. All this is a problem for democracy.

We cannot be silenced, although it is understandable if someone who is attacked viciously decides that it is too much and withdraws. The answer to the hate mail phenomenon, in my mind, is at least three-fold. First, we need to hear from more
critical scholars (and activists) in public, so no one has to shoulder the burden alone. In other words, we cannot let hate mail work as a deterrent. Second, we need support networks and institutionalised support measures that also cover those of us in precarious labour situations. Third, we need a huge structural change – to smash patriarchy – in order for critical voices to be heard and diversity of faces to be seen in public without becoming immediate targets of hate.

Arts-based methods and using humour and laughter creatively can, in my experience, work in both countering hate and helping to cope with it. Turning the hatred into something to laugh at can provide at least temporary relief. A Finnish journalist Maria Petterson collected a sample of the hate mail she had received and put together a panel, which analysed and rated each piece of hate mail in ‘The Great Hatemessage Competition’. The results were hilarious and at the same time made visible the kind of hatred some of us receive.

Hate mail is a security issue. While there is most often no way of knowing whether the threats included in some of the hate mail are credible, just being a target of hate affects one’s sense of security very deeply. The effectiveness of hate mail as a deterrent also relies on this uncertainty; the threats may not be credible, then again what if one of them is? Moreover, it’s difficult to get any institutional help when there is no direct physical threat. For example, the Finnish police do not regard hate mail itself as violence, nor does the legislation recognise gender as an aspect of hate crimes.
Hate mail is also a security issue simply because it is violence, even when it does not lead to actual physical threat. This is a crucial point that needs to be more widely understood. Often the recipients of hate mail get well-meaning advice to just ignore it, or not to let it show that it hurts (because then the senders would ‘win’ or know that their tactics work), or just to get off the internet. If it was a question of any other kind of violence, this kind of advice would be quite absurd.

Collective action and mutual support networks are effective ways of countering the problems hate mail poses for each individual. Laughing together at the absurdity of some of the messages is one of the most empowering tactics. While institutions, such as the universities and media, have to take action to protect their employees and the police and legislative bodies need to start taking hate mail more seriously, informal networks can do a lot to provide spaces for strategizing, venting and laughter.

For me, art-making has been an important and empowering method in my academic life and now I have used it in the context of hate mail as well. In the summer of 2018, I completed a large installation titled Alalaita – Underbelly for the Mänttä Art Festival, which is one of the main annual contemporary art exhibitions in Finland. The piece consists of a wall of text that reaches from the floor to about eye-level. The text is a collection of hateful messages which some other feminists and I have received. Some of the messages are repeated over and over again. Displaying the hate as a wall of text makes it visible and takes the hate from the personal spaces of my various inboxes to a public arena. Interestingly, many people have been surprised and/or shocked by the hateful content of the text, as it is hard for them to imagine that some people do actually send those kinds of messages.
At the top of the text there are nine glitter boxes. The ‘door’ of each box is slightly open at an angle, so you have to peep in to see what is in them. It is a bit like opening any of your inboxes. You never know what is coming. Some of the boxes contain literal depictions of some of the metaphors used in the hate messages, e.g. ‘a meat wallet’, ‘humpback whale in sand storm’, while some boxes contain something I’ve found empowering. They contain, for example, a version of a meme, feminist postcards, and reminders of fun times. The idea was to counter the hate with something funny and fluffy. I have found that often when I make something and have great fun when making it, the result for the viewer is funny as well. Laughter and humour are collective endeavours after all. The literal depictions of the metaphors I find particularly funny, when they are seen in a material form, and through laughter comes empowerment.

[INSERT IMAGE 17.3]

<figure>Figure 17.3 Saara Särmä: underbelly, installation, 2018. Translation of some of the text.

<extract>Women are by nature less than men so this is why you don’t see little whores as CEOs. What is a woman? A woman is a whore and a servant. What is a feminist? A feminist is the state’s whore and a servant. You so called feminists should be sucking those men’s cocks, they have done so much work for Finland. You are just parasite women and your intelligence is less than median. It’s not up to me that your dad didn’t fuck you up the ass when you where little. Fucking fatso. Women belong in the kitchen and women are just sex toys. The foremother of all shameless hags and tolerance whores. You are just a manatee. Oh yuck, kill yourself. Your being a
“human” makes me vomit and I’m embarrassed for your existence. I’ve been thinking of killing you. When did you last look into the mirror? Laughable fatface. Thank god you don’t have many years left because of that BMI and your age, we’ll get rid of one whining feminist for good’.

<head1>Notes

1 Ironically, given that this Finnish institution has tried so hard to get rid of the past and the idea that it is a ‘red university’, this statement seemingly spins on Marx’s thesis that ‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.’

https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm

<head1>List of references

<bibliography>


