

Art for Bodies: Reflections on Centring Embodiment in Art Spaces.

I have returned to my art practice this year, after a year focussing on my academic work. I wrote my dissertation on anti-ableist action in the academy and the internet. I also created an Instagram community called Disabled Makers, which is a platform for sharing the work of disabled makers (in the broadest sense) and artists. Although I took time away from my 'official' art practice, I spent a lot of time on crafts, my hobbies, my domestic practice (which is most of my life because I am often housebound.) I learned to spin yarn, dye fibre and fabric with plants that I found or from food waste, I learned to throw pots and set up a tiny pottery studio in my shed. I documented these journeys online on my Instagram @crippleknits.

I have always loved crafting and learning new handwork skills, but I always kept them separate from what I considered to be my 'legitimate art practice,' which is much more conceptual. I left Goldsmiths for a year in 2017, feeling very alienated from Art School. My body did not feel welcome in art spaces. I was made to justify my existence, my needs were deemed too much, I was not imagined in the room. So I returned to my crafts. I didn't want to think about concept, I just wanted somewhere to mend my relationship with my body. You do not need to justify the existence of a mug or a sweater.

Now that I have re-engaged with art school, I am careful to maintain my boundaries. I continue to work from home, where my body is better accommodated. I do not have set working hours, as my research is primarily my survival. I live and work in crip time, a disability theory which Alison Kafer defines as: "a challenge to normative and normalising expectations of pace and scheduling. Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds."

My practice has moved towards exploring embodiment in relation to art and art spaces, informed by my own experiences, as referenced above. I have observed that the typical minimalism which is used to legitimise or mark out art spaces, not only aligns itself with normative western whiteness, but often disregards or even seeks to erase the body of the gallery visitor. Video works sit in the middle of the room on old televisions, expecting the viewer to stand for 10 minutes in order to see them in their entirety. A classic white cube gallery aims to eliminate all that might distract from the work, to become a 'neutral' space. A gallery I volunteered for originally asked me to stand for hours while invigilating; when asked for a chair they provided a stool, because a chair detracted from the works in the expansive room. Those of us whose unpaid labour was used to enforce the rules of the space were asked to make our bodies and their needs as invisible as possible to maintain its aesthetic.

Often, artwork that is specifically about bodies attempts to transcend the mundane into a more profound appreciation of the corporeal. Only bodies that have artistic value are considered, not in the context of their needs but in what they produce, intellectually or aesthetically. Consider the history of performance art - some of the most iconic performance pieces feature the artist performing some feat of physical endurance, for example, Marina Abramovich's Rhythm 0, in which she gives her body over to the audience to do what they want to her with a selection of objects. The value of the performance predicates the performer overcoming their bodily exhaustion or discomfort. For another example, Vito Acconci's performance 'Seedbed', in which he masturbated in a gallery under a wooden ramp for 8 hours a day, narrating sexual fantasies about the gallery visitors as they walked over the ramp. While Acconci's pleasure was foregrounded to an extreme (which in itself likely became exhausting) the bodies of the visitors were objectified and alienated. While this alienation is more evident and violent towards certain bodyminds, it affects everyone who engages with art spaces to some degree. We learn to perform in order to function within the environment which is, more often than not, created by and for upper middle class, cis, able-bodied men, towards a lofty neoliberal ideal that is unattainable, even to those who approximate it most convincingly.

My research has been to find ways to respond to these environments without adding additional labour to those who are most excluded.

An example that comes to mind is Frida Kahlo, who, before her death, had her sick bed carried to her own exhibition so that she could be there in the room. This was such an important move in

Kahlo's own circumstance because her works were self portraits - they showed a disabled body, which had the potential to be objectified by the able gaze. By interrupting the the performativity of the exhibition space through publicly showing her body's vulnerability, its sickness, in a way that could not be shied away from or made metaphorical, she also allowed the visitors to have an intimate experience with her and the work. She did not do this at her own expense, but by prioritising her own physical needs. This invokes the theory of 'access intimacy' by Mia Mingus, which describes the intimacy that is formed when one person truly understands another's access needs. Mingus writes: 'the power of access intimacy is that it reorients our approach from one where disabled people are expected to squeeze into able bodied people's world, and instead *calls upon able bodied people to inhabit our world.*' Many of the gallery spaces in which Kahlo's works hang today would be inaccessible to her - to many in the art world, disabled bodyminds are very interesting in concept, but very inconvenient in person. However, by bringing her bed into that gallery full of paintings of her embodied experience, she allowed visitors a glimpse into her world.

For my own part, I chose the crit space as a point of infiltration. I find crits extremely hard on my bodymind, as we sit on uncomfortable plastic chairs for up to 7 hours analysing each others' work, and I do not have the stamina for it. I have negotiated this by coming in for only part of the crit, but even an hour or two is exhausting for me. Similar to the art spaces referenced above, the crit does not account for the embodiment of its participants, focussing solely on the work and the intellectual response to it. I decided that for my crit presentation, I would try to shift the focus onto the bodies and needs of the attendees with a somatic meditation involving clay. I brought pillows, for people to be more comfortable, but nobody used them, likely because it was so unusual to be offered such a basic amenity, and they felt that they did not really need or deserve the extra comfort. The aim was not only to prioritise my own needs but to offer that care to others, highlighting through contrast the ways that is our bodyminds are not considered in the crit space.

Visiting an exhibit called Reading is Yielding by crip artist Johanna Hedva with my friend also developed my thinking about the interruption of care into art space. It was hosted by the gallery Parrhesiades; Hedva, based on the birth chart of each visitor picked out excerpts from books that both they and the curators owned. There was the option either to view this text online, or to make an appointment to visit the gallery, which was, in fact, the curators' home. We sat in the office, drinking a special tea blend concocted by the artist, and the curator read us the extracts that had been selected for us. It was a deeply intimate experience. The curator, Lynton Talbot, explained that Parrhesiades was built on the question - how can you become a curator if you can't afford a gallery space? Which he and his fellow curator and partner Hana Noorali, have addressed by turning their home into the gallery space. It looks just like a home, it is not sparse and white. After receiving our readings, we talked with Lyndon for at least an hour about our selves, our work, and our struggles as disabled artists. This experience of care and consideration, not simply as a generic consumer but as an integral part of the work, suggested to me that another tactic for creating care in art spaces would be to reimagine what an art space can be, to bring art to more domestic contexts.

Hedva, in a move reminiscent of Frida Kahlo, has recently published their access 'rider', a list of access conditions to be met by institutions with whom they are working. This is another example of artists leveraging their power for access. Artist Leah Clements created 'access docs for artists', a website which helps artists create documents such as Hedva's. My hunch, however, is that this is less likely to work for lesser known artists, who may simply be passed over in favour of those with fewer or 'easier' access requests. I continue to search for ways for artists to interrupt ableism in art spaces without putting their mental and physical health or career at risk.

Most recently, I have begun to make works that can be viewed in a variety of contexts, both public and private, within and outside of conventional art spaces, such as audio recordings of somatic meditations, and poetry. My intention is to create a sanctuary space within the degree show to play the meditations as well as providing them in printed form and online. One of the meditations will be available through the program 'the remote body', a series which responds to the current health crisis and the need for sick, crip and disabled artists to connect with one another online.