IN RESPONSE TO PAIN:
MOVING TOWARD A SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE

By

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Exiled from the kingdom of health, the ill inherit a different land.

- Lisa Olstein

Pain Studies

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the role of an emergent embodied art practice in better understanding, communicating and managing the experiences of chronic illness and chronic pain. Referencing a history of pain scales, diagnostic tools, and pain management strategies that fail to provide adequate relief to those living with chronic conditions, this thesis illustrates the process I have taken to reconstruct my art practice which, built in tandem with intentional lived practices, has enabled me to inhabit my sick body in new ways. At an intersection between queer and chronic illness discourse, following an autotheoretical approach to making and writing, this project is built in deep connection to my own lived experiences. Life with chronic illness is shrouded with uncertainty and demands a practice that embraces the ebbs and flows, trial and errors, and desperate reaches directed by a wavering physical capacity. As such, I rely upon a network of actions that together build the foundation of my research praxis. Connecting my work to artists Janine Antoni, Zoe Leonard, Louise Bourgeois and Jo Spence, my thesis body of work weaves together drawing, photography, video, sculpture, digital collage, note-taking, dancing and walking as different modes of making. The residual artworks produced through these embodied practices work together to communicate my experience as an artist living with chronic illness. Concurrently, these practices offer themselves as maintenance, aiding in managing the symptoms of my physical condition and in the development of a sustainable art practice, re-imagined to work with the needs of my body rather than against it.

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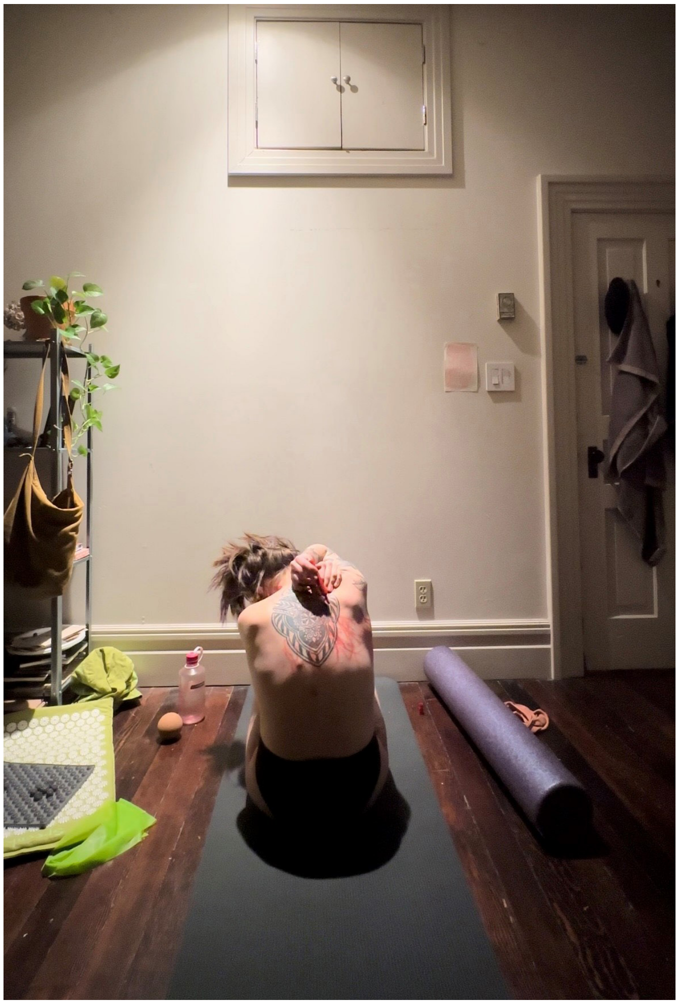


Fig. 1: *Pain Tracking, Pain Study*, 2023

Flickering, quivering, pulsing, throbbing, beating, pounding, jumping, flashing, shooting, pricking, boring, drilling, stabbing, lacerating, pinching, pressing, gnawing, cramping, crushing, tugging, pulling, wrenching, hot, burning, scalding, searing, tingling, itchy, smarting, stinging, dull, sore, hurting, aching, heavy, tender, taut, rasping, splitting, tiring, exhausting, sickening, suffocating, fearful, frightful, terrifying, punishing, gruelling, cruel, vicious, killing, wretched, blinding, annoying, troublesome, miserable, intense, unbearable, spreading, radiating, penetrating, piercing, tight, numb, drawing, squeezing, tearing, cool, cold, freezing, nagging, nauseating, agonizing, dreadful, torturing.

McGill Pain Questionnaire, Self Report Diagnostic Tool[1]

THE BODY IN PAIN

I came to what I know now as my art practice accidentally. Months before the arrival of the pandemic I moved to the unceded traditional territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh people, also known as Vancouver, British Columbia. Slowly becoming orientated to my new surroundings, the arrival of COVID-19 swiftly shut down the city, and with it, the connections I had just begun to make. I found myself without a job; as a primary and secondary school instructor already struggling with burnout, I had little desire to apply for teaching certification in my new province, much less to begin a teaching contract within the new reality of Zoom school. Having dealt with a sharp decline in my physical health the year prior, I had come to recognize that the demands of working within the classroom exceeded the capacities of my physicality. Consistently blowing past my limitations had left me in a state of disconnect, out of touch with my body's quiet pleas, it began yelling.

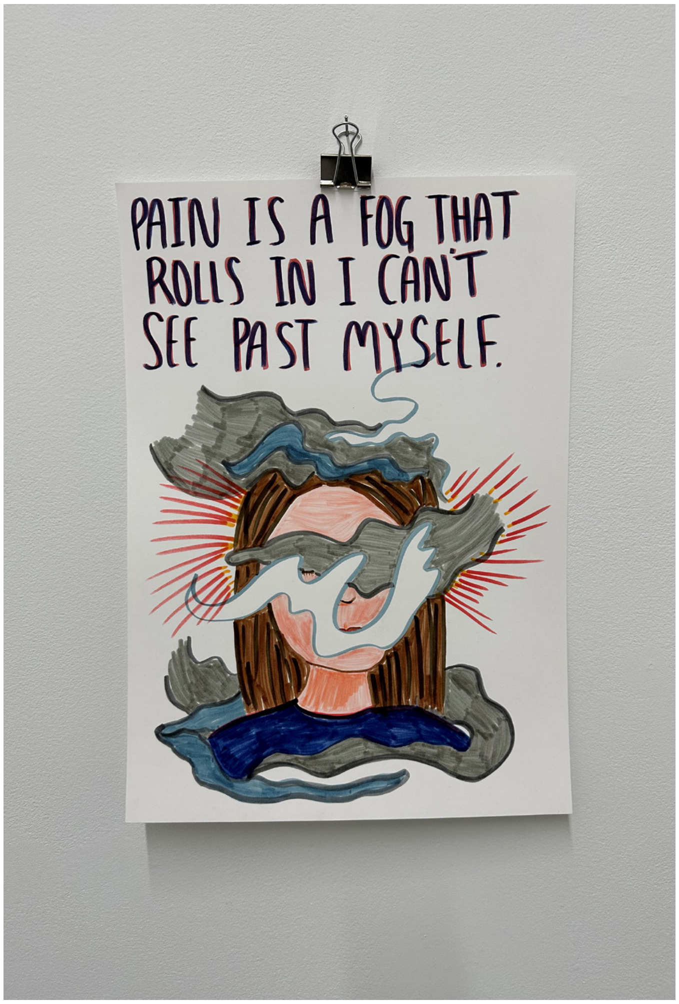


Fig. 2: *Pain is a Fog*, 2022

In her book, *The Body in Pain,* Elaine Scarry speaks of the "unsharability" of pain due at least in part to its resistance to language, a quality she describes as "not simply one of its incidental or accidental attributes but essential to what it is."[2] I have found this to be true; sleepless nights spent scanning for the right words to bring to my doctors to help them *get it*, to bring my pain forward enough to make it visible, to make it *real,* an affirmation; to make them finally say, "Yes, I see how badly you are hurting, I'm here to help."

But *shooting, stabbing, wrenching, blinding, nauseating, suffocating,* they all fall short.

A dead metaphor is a word or phrase that has lost its metaphoric force through common usage and try as I might, my words lie flat.[3]

How do you describe pain when you've been in it for so long you no longer know what pain isn't?[4]

Life with chronic illness is shrouded in constant clouds of not knowing. Lack of diagnoses, strategies to manage symptoms, words to explain to others how shitty you feel. Not knowing what thing you did or ate or didn't do caused the flare of symptoms you are currently battling, how to pinpoint the exact location where those symptoms reside and how to get the flared-up body to calm back down again. Where things started, when they started and how they've changed and intensified since; not knowing lives in the lack of diagnosis, in the abyss that is pain with no end in sight.

"When one speaks about 'one's own physical pain' and about 'another person's physical pain,' one might almost appear to be speaking about two wholly distinct orders of events,"[5] writes Scarry. She continues, "[f]or the person whose pain it is, it is 'effortlessly' grasped (that is, even with the most heroic effort it cannot not be grasped); while for the person outside the sufferer's body, what is 'effortless' is not grasping it."[6]

Despite being so familiar with the experience of housing pain, I came to recognize the inadequacy of the current medical system in providing me with the ability to understand, communicate and manage the symptoms of my chronic conditions in a meaningful, connective way. Talking about pain (both their own and the pain of others) tends to make people uncomfortable and so we don't. Instead, we avoid the topic whenever possible, thus rendering the sick body a lonely place to live.

Each piece of writing that I've found on the subject seems to carry the same sentiment; pain is hard to talk about. In her book, *Pain Studies*, Lisa Olstein reiterates, "[d]espite or perhaps because of the dizzyingly various ways we categorize and conceptualize (let alone experience) pain, we're notoriously bad at talking about it, even literally, as in, do you have it, how much, where, what kind?"[7] I've been asked to describe my pain in numbers, 0-10, how bad is it? "Where does pain worth measuring begin?"[8] Eula Biss asks in her essay, The Pain Scale. Similarly, I wonder how, on a scale from non-existent to *the worst pain imaginable,* I could ever accurately depict the fluidity of my painscape. Ever fluctuating, pulsing, breathing, *my pain is alive and takes up space*.

Kept awake one particularly pain-fueled night, I came to realize that through years of attempting to ignore the increasingly intensifying symptoms through which my body was trying to communicate with me, I had lost the ability to be present in its sensations entirely. That night, however, I experienced a shift; I began to consider the potential of spending time *with* pain rather than simply *in* it. In the early phases of this work, spending time with pain, I did not have a clear understanding of what this meant, nor the direction I was moving. I began only with questions; What if the pain could be there without the need to actively suffer it? What else was there besides pain? What else could pain become?

I have come to rely on an emergent and embodied art practice as a tool to subvert the dynamic between myself and pain, to spend time with it without being consumed by it. What is the advantage of an emergent art practice? It creates space for not knowing, for not needing to have all of the answers in order to begin. Allowing each step to inform the one that follows, the work remains in process and with this perpetual motion, moves in the general direction of forward. With each step, each iteration, each question, each piece of writing, drawing, or making comes the potential for the next step, turn, return or pivot and with it, the work continues to become.

Janine Antoni describes her body as a funnel through which the world has been poured.[9] Central to her artwork, Antoni uses her body as both a tool for making and as a source of conceptual meaning within her art practice. In *Lick and Lather,* Antoni cast fourteen self-portrait busts, seven made from chocolate and the other seven, from soap, gradually reshaping her image by licking and washing the sculptures.[10] Challenging the traditionally upheld standards of beauty by distortion of self-image, Antoni's employment of familiar materials transforms these daily care-based rituals, promoting an empathetic recognition of the making process within her viewer.[11] It is this dual relationship of the artist's body showing up as tool and subject simultaneously that interests me most for it speaks to my own ways of making.

Fig. 3: *Lick and Lather,* Janine Antoni, 1999
Figure Removed due to copyright restrictions. The information removed is a photograph of Antoni's "Lick and Lather" showing two lines of busts displayed on top of white cylindrical plinths.
http://www.janineantoni.net/lick-and-lather

I have had to create space for pain to show up within my practice as my subject, collaborator and constant company while I work. In permitting pain to show up within my body and my practice rather than fighting to drown it out, I've created space to explore our relationship through a lens of curiosity and expansiveness. When drawing *with* pain, I allow it to guide the types of marks I make while following it around my body. When dancing *with* pain, I allow it to guide the succession of movements that I follow. In working *with* rather than *against* my pain, I seek to share with it the agency to direct my making process.

In their book, *Living Creatively with Chronic Illness,* Eugine G.Wheeler and Joyce Dace-Lombard speak to the value of pain investigation. "An approach that works especially well when pain is intense involves investigating it," they explain. "This means opening yourself to the pain, leaning into it, softening around it, and allowing yourself to move beyond the anticipated fearful experience. This approach, too, involves using your creative imagination."[12]

I have found art-making to be an ideal tool for conducting such pain investigations. Through a process of multi-media experimentation; action, reflection and response, I think through making. With each step and each iteration, I learn something new about my pain, creating a residual trail of artworks that seek to communicate my internal experience along the way. This is not art therapy, I am not looking to *heal* myself, my doctors all agree that I am chronically ill. I have not, however, accepted the current status of my body as permanent and hold firm to the belief that there is always room to feel better.

Autotheory is a mode of creating art, writing or literature that seeks to combine autobiographical thoughts and experiences with philosophical and theoretical discourse as a resistance to traditional genera conventions and boundaries between disciplines.[13] Flexible in nature, autotheory can take the form of art, art writing and literature, providing space for self-analysis grounded within and simultaneously challenging broader political and cultural epistemologies.[14] “Autotheory reveals the tenuousness of maintaining illusory separations between art and life, theory and practice, work and the self, research and motivation, just as feminist artists and scholars have long argued,”[15] writes Lauren Fournier in her book, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing and Criticism*.

As chronic illness and pain present as a deeply personal and individualized experience, I have found that through using an autotheorical approach to making and writing, I have been able to draw from and embed my own lived experience within the broader chronic illness discourse. “The trouble with standard pain scales, it seems to me, is that they weren’t written by the right people- the people in pain,”[16] writes Olstein in *Pain Studies*. “Often misheard as language that does not communicate, it turns out that the seemingly chaotic fragments of description people in pain manage to offer in face cohere into meaningful systems of categorization.”[17] It is crucial for the voices of those living with chronic illness to show up in the progression of reimagined health care and I’ve found autotheory to be a tool to recenter lived experience as a vital component of research.

Carmen Papalia is a social practice artist and disability activist whose work is rooted in concerns of access within the public sphere.[18] Responding to the failures of the institutional disability support services that he was offered when a hereditary condition resulted in the obstruction of his vision, Papalia’s “Open Access” manifesto presents a framework that reconsiders accessibility through a lens of mutual care.[19] Offering five main tenets, the self-described “non-visual” artist presents accessibility as a practice centred around the needs of those present; adapted, negotiated and upheld through mutual exchange.[20] In opposition to the “recipient of support and provider” power structure created through enforced policies aiming to mitigate concerns of access, Papalia’s *Open Access* redistributes agency among those present, recognizing interdependence as being central to the radical restructuring of power.[21] Referencing individualized embodied knowledge, *Open Access* works to “reimagine normalcy” by embracing the expansive and complex nature of identities present within each temporary, collective space.[22] Through perpetual negotiation, Papalia’s framework cultivates trust between individuals to create a network of support that is responsive to each of their disclosed needs.

With his central focus on creating interdependent learning communities, Papalia’s work through *Open Access* led me to consider the potential reach of the principles I was building within my own art practice. Describing his approach as “not only relevant to a group of people with atypical bodies or minds or behaviours, but to anybody who is living in relation to other people,”[23] I too, recognize the ways that my work can extend outside of chronic illness discourse and benefit those interested in building an art practice fit to accommodate their individualized needs, habits and lifestyles. While all pain is individual, all individuals have pain. I believe that art can be a tool to help us get in touch with our pain in new ways and in doing so, lead us to understand more about ourselves and what conditions we need in order to succeed. It is through this deepened understanding that we become more capable of advocating for ourselves and I see this as an opportunity for connection; keeping the needs of each individual front and centre we can work to rely on each other to build a network of interdependence.

HELP OR HINDER HARD TO SAY

Fig. 4: *Strange Fruit,* Zoe Leonard, 1992-1997
Figure Removed due to copyright restrictions. The information removed is a photograph of Leonard's "Strange Fruit" comprised of an assortment of mended fruit skins laid out on the gallery floor.
https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/92277

During the 1980's and 90's Zoe Leonard was living and working in New York City. A prominent AIDS activist and advocate for queer liberation, Leonard lost many friends to the virus at the height of the AIDS epidemic.[24] It was during this time that the process of making what came to be known as *Strange Fruit* began. The work, made up of 295 fruit skins stitched back together upon the consumption of their fruits was born, not as an artwork, but as a coping method following the loss of her friend and fellow artist, David Wojnarowicz. Finding solace in the meditative action of mending, over the course of five years Leonard repaired banana, orange, grapefruit and avocado peels, embellishing them with buttons, zippers and wax and sinew. For the year and a half following the making of Strange Fruit, Leonard worked alongside a conservator, attempting to prevent the decomposition of her fruit peels. It was only upon achieving the desired preservation that Leonard determined that the process of decay was integral to the work and that no conservation techniques would be applied.[25] Raising questions around the value of permanence, Leonard's fruits are displayed almost haphazardly, laid out covering the gallery floor. Inviting her viewers to engage with a living medium, one that shrivels and rots and crumbles with the impact of time and careless footsteps, we are reminded of the fragility of life and of our own death.

As in Leonard's *Strange Fruit,* I first came to this way of working as a means of coping. In 2017, during a period of deterioration in my own health with no answers coming back from tests and doctors, I found myself sewing a loaf of bread back together in my living room one evening. Using thick black thread, there was something in the repetitive action, the care needed to stitch bread back together without ripping it that felt cathartic. Stored in the bag it came in, the bread proceeded to rot around its sutures a week later. At the time, I was operating on impulse, yet to understand the significance of the living medium that I was working with and its parallels to the body.

Fig.5: *Untitled (Sewn Bread)*, 2017

Fig.6: *Untitled (Bread Mending)*, 2022

Years later, still struggling to cope with flaring pain, I found myself again sewing a loaf of bread back together. Gluten-free this time, as per the diet I now follow, and with delicate thread matched in colour to the bread's crust, I was determined to mend with a higher level of care than I had shown to the loaf's predecessor. Completed in one eight-hour sitting so as to prevent the bread from drying out, the process of creating *Untitled (Bread Mending)* was simultaneously an act of endurance and a space of solace. At times, the making of this work pulled me out of the sensations of my own body, the repetitive stitching offering itself as a sort of meditative action and a reprieve from my pain. Other times, however, it was met with frustration; the crumbling gluten-free bread continually ripped, my back ached, I wanted to be done. Upon its completion, the slices of bread were once again returned back to their initial loaf form. From a distance, the threads holding each slice together seem to disappear; it is only upon closer examination that the evidence of mending is revealed. Mimicking the experience of pain, invisible and easily overlooked without further inquiry, this piece became a sort of self-portrait, an expression of the unseen work that goes into maintaining a body with an invisible illness.

The making of *Untitled (Bread Mending)* prompted me to think deeper about my impulse to use bread as a stand-in for my own body within my practice. When I began working with bread back in 2017, I was teaching and had a student explain to me that in Egyptian Arabic the word for life, Aish, is colloquially used to refer to bread as well. This notion of bread as life has felt particularly poignant through the process of recognizing that my body is no longer able to digest gluten. Unable to consume bread, its dough became as inedible as clay for me and thus, brought me to explore it further as an art medium.

Help or Hinder Hard to Say is a recent body of work that I have iterated and displayed twice during my time at Emily Carr University. Comprised of ten bread-based sculptures (some loaves boughten, some baked by myself), the various loaves of bread are formed, altered and staged questioning whether their interventions are there to help or harm. Staples penetrate the bread's skin in an attempt to mitigate the deep cuts carved into its surface, bandaids cling to dried cubes, awkwardly forcing them to find their way back together and bread bulges between the binding of elastics working to contain its torn pieces. Together they beg the question; help or hinder? Hard to say.

This body of work explores the ways that despite our best intentions, providing care remains an elusive and sometimes misguided practice. Regardless of our best efforts, we may not always know what is needed when caring for ourselves and for others and at times, may make things worse despite our best intentions. In the context of chronic illness, the continual process of symptom management is made tiresome by the recognition that the underlying cause is in fact, unsolvable. Made worse by the fickle nature of a body riddled with inflammation, it is often hard to differentiate between the things that will help and cause harm as they remain forever in flux. What works today causes problems tomorrow and so, *Help or Hinder Hard to Say* became a place to explore the feelings of futility that accompany an attempt to care for and mend a body that will not recover.

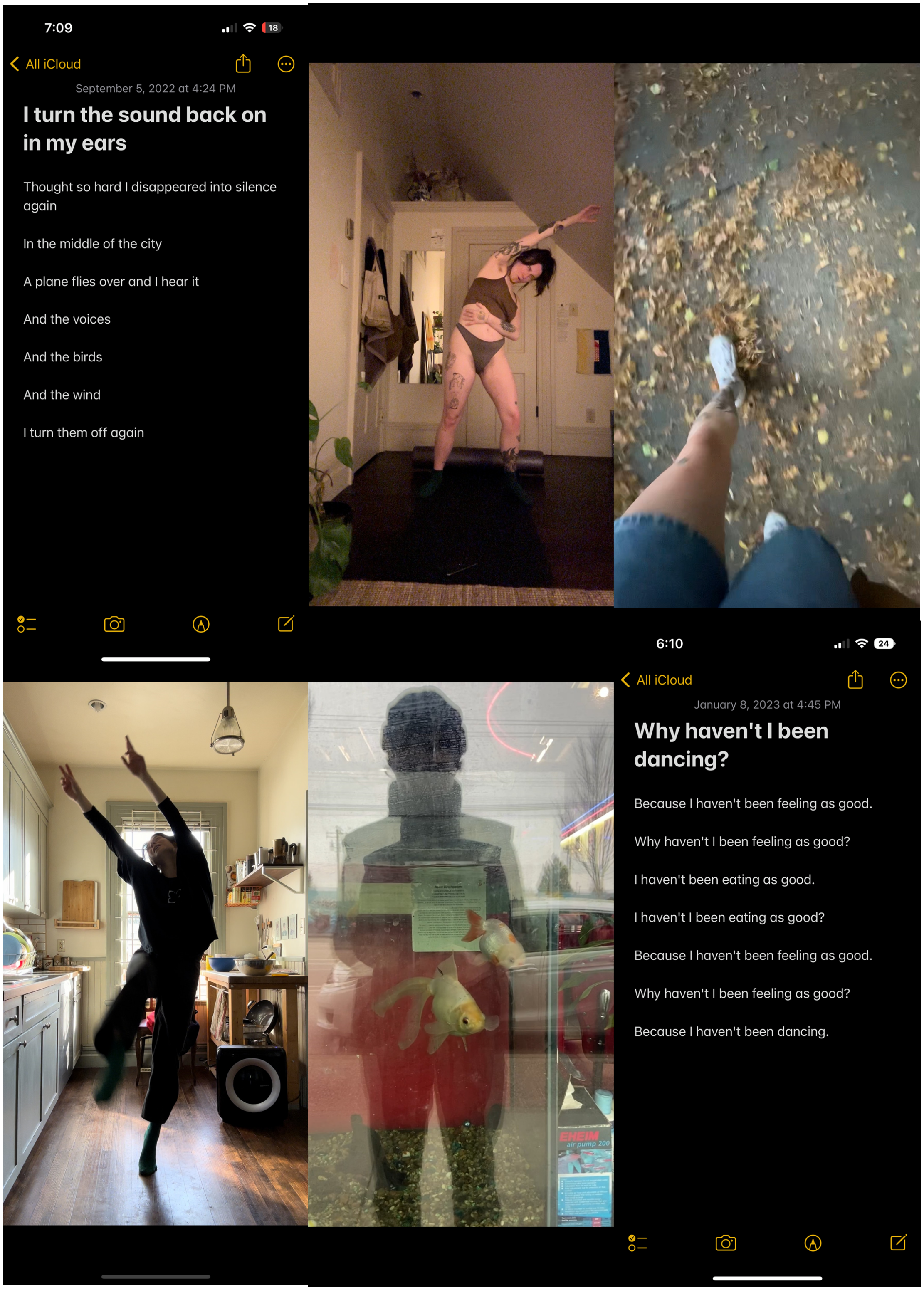
Fig.7: *Help or Hinder Hard to Say,* 2022

In an interview with Anna Blume, Leonard references the process of repair she enacts on her fruit skins stating, “This act of fixing something broken, repairing the skin after the fruit is gone strikes me as both pathetic and beautiful. At any rate, as intensely human. You can try to fix it, but the fruit is gone. And yet, we need repositories for our grief. We need eulogies. And relics. Monuments and mementos.”[26] Embracing the natural tendency of all things breaking down with time, Leonard grants her work the opportunity to change form and decay without intervention. It begs the question, does the value of an object deteriorate as it does? Or, can something be gained in the process of breaking down?

In *Baguette Piece,* exhibited in both renditions of *Help or Hinder Hard to Say,* what began as a bakery baguette fastened with tied cord to a comically long hot water bottle, changed in meaning upon the progression of decomposition. In the process of installing the work for the second time, months after the initial showing, the now dry baguette broke in half, becoming more dependent on the support of the hot water bottle it was bound to. Previously unclear as to whether it was support or restraint that was being offered through its bindings, the now broken bread seems to suggest itself as a recipient of care. With its pain now visible, this wound became an unintentional strength of the work, providing with it, emergent meaning. Like Leonard, I've come to see the decomposition of this living material as an integral component of each breadwork's life. It is in the celebration of impermanence that these works become, allowed to live, change and break down rather than frozen in time.

Fig.8: *Baguette Piece, First Showing,* 2022

Fig.9: *Baguette Piece, Second Showing,* 2022



September 5, 2022 at 4:24 PM

I turn the sound back on in my ears

Thought so hard I disappeared into silence again

In the middle of the city

A plane flies over and I hear it

And the voices

And the birds

And the wind

I turn them off again

January 8, 2023 at 4:45 PM

Why haven't I been dancing?

Because I haven't been feeling as good.

Why haven't I been feeling as good?

I haven't been eating as good.

I haven't I been eating as good?

Because I haven't been feeling as good.

Why haven't I been feeling as good?

Because I haven't been dancing.

Fig.10: *Various Pain Studies*, 2022-2023

MOBILE PRACTICE

In a closed-down city in the early days of the pandemic, my body ached from an excess of time spent sitting and so, I turned to walking. Initially an attempt to keep my body in motion, my walks slowly became more intentional and I developed a walking practice. Without a preconceived plan, route or timeline, I found myself wandering through the city, documenting my walks on impulse. Using my phone to collect photographs, videos, audio recordings and written thoughts, I did not have a plan for the things that I was gathering but allowed them to accumulate all the same. With time, I came to realize I had created a trail of my artistic impulses and curiosities, a sort of archive that I could return to and build off of on the next walk. I have since come to recognize these walks as the methodology through which I work, a sort of digital sketchbook or record-keeping that paired with movement, activates my thinking in an embodied way. It is here, in my *mobile practice*, that I begin to slowly formulate, shape and massage the ideas that through time, become my bodies of work.

Fig.11: Still from *Performance for No one, Anyone, Walk Documentation,* 2022

When I say that I have a walking practice, I am referring to the many fluctuating strands of practice I rely on while moving through the city. The walk itself provides movement, through which I am able to tap into a creative mind space easier; I find that I can only keep up with my thoughts while I'm in motion. My notes app has become a key tool to keep track of my thinking, consistently jotting down thoughts about my body, my art practice, projects and processes, as well as my surroundings while I move. Serving many functions, these notes operate as a sort of digital memory, a place to collect thoughts to return to and build off of on future walks, within the studio, and as I go about my living.

I make so that I can think. Orientating around a problem; searching and practicing towards a solution, I learn something new each time I reengage with an idea, question or medium. I suppose in the context of making art, this could be known as iterating. I think through doing; unable to think directly at something, I have learned to think and make around it and have fostered the role of movement within my creative process. Speaking on the meaning of orientation within her book, *Queer Phenomenology,* Sara Ahmed suggests that we are orientated so long as we know where we are when we turn one way or another.[27] By such definition, I have been orientated, turned towards my body's pain for as long as I can remember.

Antithetical to the interest of a sore body, in an attempt to evade pangs brought on by sudden movement, I tend to hold stiff around pain. Writing of repetitive strain injuries, Ahmed explains, "We repeat some actions, sometimes over and over again, and this is partly about the nature of the work we might do. Our body takes the shape of this repetition; we get stuck in certain alignments as an effect of this work[...] The work of repetition is not neutral work; it orients the body in some ways rather than others."[28] Having held this position for so long, I've become aware that my spine no longer rests in its proper orientation. As such, periods of immobility result in my bones settling further into the wrong spots, adding still further pain and stiffness to the equation (sitting here for so long writing this paper has been tough). "Depending on which way one turns," Ahmed writes, "different worlds might even come into view. If such turns are repeated over time, then bodies acquire the very shape of such direction. It is not, then, that bodies simply have a direction, or that they follow directions, in moving this way or that. Rather, in moving this way, rather than that, and moving in this way again and again, the surfaces of the bodies in turn acquire their shape. Bodies are "directed and they take the shape of this direction."[29]

Just as my body has been shaped by the direction of pain, I have observed the shaping process at work within the bodies of archives that I have accumulated. Through directing my focus toward crafting practices that provide embodied engagement with the topics that I am researching and theorizing, I've been able to maintain a body of work that is thematically consistent, despite the wide variety of methods and media through which I practice. When I speak of practice, I am referring to a set of actions that I engage with in a repetitive manner that, through deliberate attention and effort, yield growth within an area of focus. I do not find it helpful to view a distinction between the things that I am practicing within my personal life and within my art practice. Instead, through viewing both as an opportunity for expansive engagement, each question, idea, movement, and media experimentation becomes a space for ritualistic play. In *What Exactly is Play and Why is it such a Powerful Vehicle for Learning,* Peter Gray offers play as an opportunity to step outside of "the immediately present real world" and into one of imagination.[30] The need for space from one's present reality is but a symptom of chronic illness; to sit in pain and sickness all the time leads to defeat. I've found play to be disruptive in that it provides an alternative path, one where the conditions are mine to set and free to move as I see fitting.

Fig.12: *Heating Pad Overuse,*
Pain Study, 2023

I see walking as a form of play that helps me to move through stuck spots and I've found this to be true within my art practice, body and mind. Upon moving through these spots, I find myself naturally engaged in my creative processes for my capacities for noticing and responding are higher. Oscillating between internal and external worlds, I find my thoughts take a walk as I do. Stopping briefly to photograph, video, audio record or jot down a note as I walk, I work to maintain my pace as I've noticed a correlation between my physical and productive momentum.

By abstaining from creating a route, timeline or destination and instead following my curiosities and impulses wherever they lead, I've become aware of patterns in the things I'm intuitively drawn to. This is the same process I apply to my artmaking, rather than trying to control an intended product, I have found it yields better results to instead focus on building intentional practices that make space for the ways that I intuitively work and the patterns in content I gravitate toward. Lack of attachment to a specific outcome has allowed me to play with practice as a means of accumulating and producing archives. These archives become raw material to play with, moulding and shaping as my thinking and practices progress. Always in iteration, these practices remain in flux, growing and shifting alongside my needs for them, becoming a project in and of themselves.

By definition, to be mobile is to be capable of moving or being moved and within the context of my art practice, mobility wears many hats.[31] First and foremost, my practice is mobile in that so much of it takes place in motion. Similar to my walking practice, I have built dancing and stretching in as key components of my daily routines as through them, my body feels better. Once again using my mobile phone as my main tool, I conduct pain investigations while engaging in these practices; photographing trailing marks on my stomach left behind from heating pad overuse, videoing myself as I stretch, searching for answers in my misalignments, recording the sounds that escape from my mouth at the height of a pain flare to understand more about the language that pain speaks. Studying the sensations of my body as I move, I seek to expand out of the stiffness I've been stuck in for so long.

Capable of serving multiple functions, lightweight and always with me, my phone makes it possible for me to engage in my art practice in tandem with my lived practices. Through framing components of my lived routines, such as stretching, as a type of art-action, it has granted me the space for creative experimentation

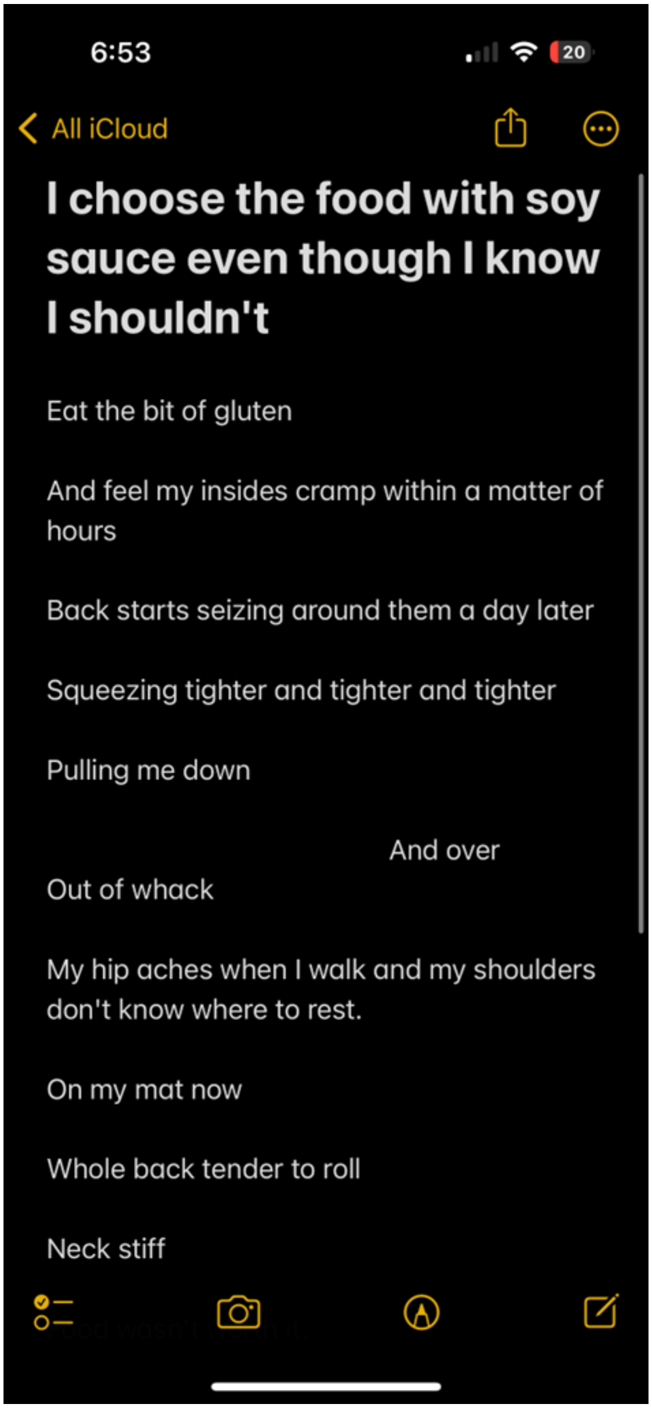
Fig.13: *Bed is the Hardest Place*, 2022

each time that I practice. It is in this space of playful embodied investigation that I have come to understand more about my physical condition.

Leading up to a semester critique, I found myself stuck in bed with flaring pain. Deadlines wait for no ill body and as such, I looked for ways to create within the confines of my present physical reality. Having recently bought a new phone, I realized its capacity to isolate an image from a photograph with a single click and began creating digital collages built from my collected archive of photographs. The ease provided by this method of digital cutting and pasting allowed me to create directly from the bed I shared with pain.

Bed is the Hardest Place became the somewhat meta portrayal of the state that I was stuck in. Arms and legs extended fully, the image of my body floats above my bed, surrounded by darkness. A leg and hand are seen resting on a second bed, emerging from the foreground of the composition as the body of a viewer. Serving two functions, this figure is first my own body, watching with distance itself lost within the grasp of pain. Simultaneously, it operates as the body of the viewer of the image, it becomes your leg and your hand as I invite you in to sit with me, with pain. A hand emerges from the top of the image as a third figure, a palmed flower petal presented as a sort of offering to the suffering body. Once again made from my own image, this hand suggests a self removed from suffering and capable of providing comfort through its learned distance. I see this third self as the one I've come to occupy through my embodied practices. In creating a place to store pain outside of my body and practices that allow me to sit with pain rather than in it, I've moved toward creating distance from my suffering.

Simultaneously to and through building what I now know as my art practice, I experienced a similar redirect to which Ahmed writes. Turning to face the queer identity that I had struggled to permit myself to understand and embrace, I turned to art-making to help me explore the self that was emerging. There is pain in reorientation; the grieving of the self you leave behind and the youthful clumsiness of making space for the new one to move in. Emotional pain is not so different from physical pain and I have carried both, in my body, in the same way. It was through my walks, having so much time to think; listening, looking and noticing out in the world, that I was forced to turn and look the same way within myself. Ahmed writes, "Orientation involves aligning body and space: we only know which way to turn *once we know which way we are facing.*"[32] Coming out as queer needed to happen in order for my art practice to be realized and at the same time, this practice needed to be realized in order to bring myself to the point of being able to come out. Both happened simultaneously, opening with them, space that had previously been occupied. It was in that space that I found myself with the capacity to begin cultivating a new relationship with my chronic illness and pain and have come to view all of my practices as an opportunity to reorientate back to self.



I choose the food with soy sauce even though I know I shouldn't

Eat the bit of gluten

And feel my insides cramp within a matter of hours

Back starts seizing around them a day later

Squeezing tighter and tighter and tighter

Pulling me down

And over

Out of whack

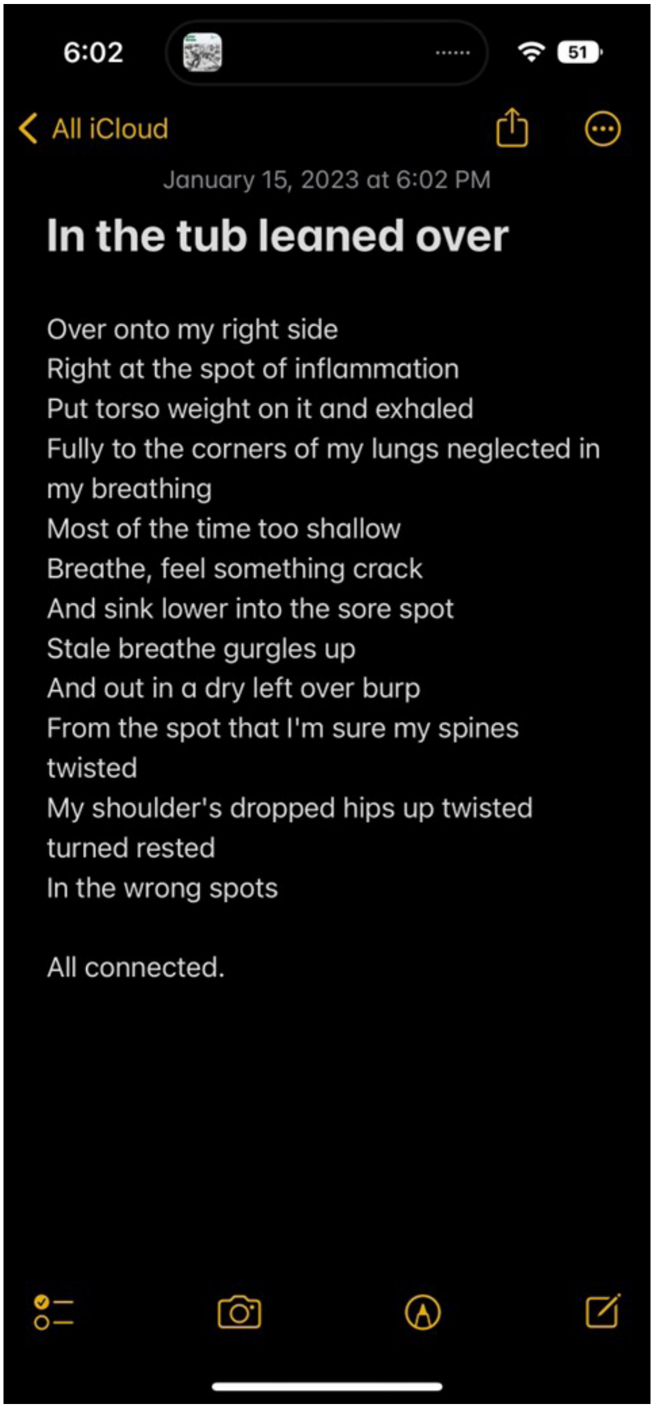
My hip aches when I walk and my shoulders don't know where to rest.

On my mat now

Whole back tender to roll

Neck stiff

Fig.14: *Chain Reactions*, *Pain Studies*, 2022



January 15, 2023 at 6:02 PM

In the tub leaned over

Over onto my right side
Right at the spot of inflammation
Put torso weight on it and exhaled
Fully to the corners of my lungs neglected in my breathing
Most of the time too shallow
Breathe, feel something crack
And sink lower into the sore spot
Stale breathe gurgles up
And out in a dry left over burp
From the spot that I'm sure my spines twisted
My shoulder's dropped hips up twisted turned rested
In the wrong spots

All connected.

Fig.15: *Chain Reactions*, *Pain Studies*, 2022

CHAIN REACTIONS

I experience chronic illness as a series of *chain reactions* that reverberate through my body; different catalysts sparking events and bringing with them, each, a series of different symptoms. These catalysts go off like fireworks, igniting each other, and once again I find myself flaring. Requiring a carefully crafted string of soothing events to bring my body back from a flare, and yet another still to arrive back mentally, rarely do we discuss the emotional tax of re-stabilizing oneself after weathering the depths of a pain flare. Following still, is the social tax that comes with remerging, walking around wearing the mask of health again until the inevitable; the next trigger sets off a chain of reactions and pulls you in. It is in this constant work of orientation, of travelling inward to tend to the needs of the lamenting body and back outwards to rejoin the world of health that one becomes disorientated. As such, it is natural to begin trying to identify the catalysts and triggers prompting these health events, seeking to understand which factors bring with them which symptoms. Being in this heightened mode of observation, patterns begin to emerge and with them, a series of variables that one can play with to work towards the intended outcome; a body that feels better.

Considered through a queer lens, I began observing chain reactions in my life as I dismantled the expectations I had been given for who and how I was to show up in the world. Through this process, I turned to focus similar attention toward my art practice, to reconsider the set of rules and conditions for making that I had been operating under. “There are also important cognitive components to embodied transformation,”[33] writes Alta Starr in her essay, *Cultivating the Self: Embodied Transformation for Artists*. “One of the most essential of which is consistently orienting ourselves towards the principles inside the practices, aiming our attention, intention and action toward the new shape we desire. Understanding these principles allows us to sustain our momentum toward transformation without getting tangled in and stymied by questions of technique or the inevitable differences among differently-abled bodies.”[34] Identifying aspects that previously stood as barriers to my making, I worked to shed my assumptions of how I thought an art practice was *supposed to* look and function and instead, made room for what it *could* look like in a way that works for me. Through this, I have been able to redirect my practice.

Bound by the ever-fluctuating constraints of my physicality, the largest obstacle to my making is the unpredictable nature of my ability, shifting day to day, hour to hour. Will it be able to handle producing the things that I dream up? Can it work for the number of hours in a day needed to be deemed productive by the institutions I operate within? Will the tools I need to make the work be too heavy, too cumbersome, my body too weak? Demonstrated by the days following the push in my production prior to each semester critique, this is a negotiation I still often come out on the wrong side of; my pain flares. There is a lot of mental weight that accompanies an attempt to exist at and beyond your physical limitations. Harder still, these limitations are often hazy and dynamic and hard to accept and so, we (those of us with chronic health conditions) push too hard. I think back to Papalia's *Open Access*, specifically his fourth tenant, which reads:

> *"Open Access disrupts the disabling conditions that limit one's agency and potential to thrive. It reimagines normalcy as a continuum of embodiments, identities, realities and learning styles and operates under the tenet that interdependence is central to a radical restructuring of power."*[35]

It is the disruption of disabling conditions mentioned here that I wish to highlight. Currently, so much falls on the individual to advocate for and accommodate their own needs, especially within institutions that operate in direct conflict with them. Moving through my MFA at Emily Carr, I have felt myself consistently running to catch up as so much of my time and energy has been dedicated to carving out lived and art practices that could be sustained physically within the demands of the program. I have been questioned on why I speak and write so much more of my practices than my artworks and it is because this is where the vast majority of my thinking has had to reside.

Without a routine, carefully structured to avoid pushing past my fluctuating and fickle physical constraints, it is easy to lose entire days to pain. In order to maintain the speed of production necessary to be successful within this program while simultaneously ensuring I was being mindful of tending to the needs of my physicality, it required a body of work where my own body could become the central focus. Through building an art practice where acts of physical maintenance such as stretching, walking and spending time sitting with pain were recognized as productive components, I found that I was able to reframe my understanding of productivity.

I believe that as art educators, it is our responsibility to assist students in disrupting the disabling conditions that prevent them from achieving their highest potential, something that needs to be considered beyond their academic person. I believe that this comes through guiding students to a point of higher cogency around their own personal requirements; as a student, as an artist and, most importantly, as a human. The impact of instructors who recognized and bolstered a diverse praxis was significant in leading me to embrace the methods I work by and helped me to quiet voices of doubt around the validity of my process. At a systemic level, the creation of spaces dedicated to recognizing and upholding the complexity of embodiments provides safety for its members. In creating space for the needs of the individual to be integrated within the greater system, we create the opportunity for each person to flourish under the conditions that best serve them.

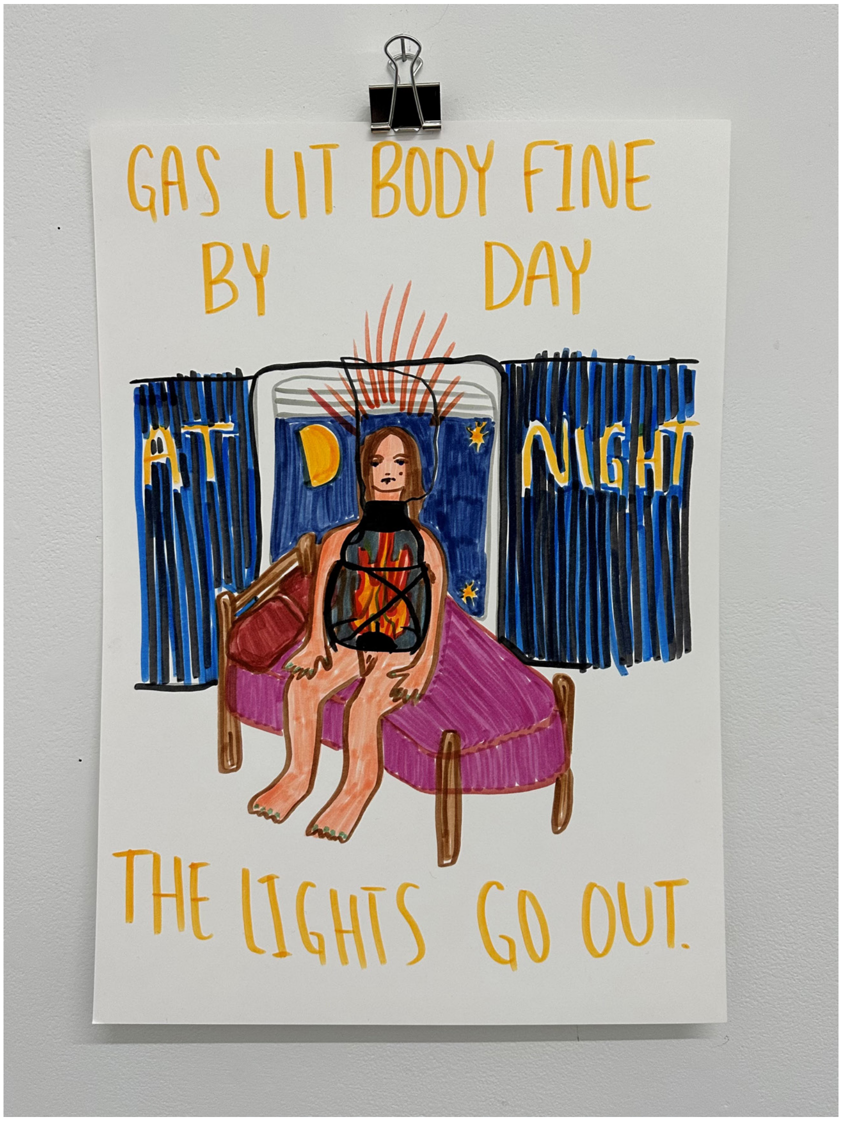


Fig.16: *By Night,* 2022

When my pain is quiet I work with my hands. It is here that I have the mental and physical capacity to do more, for pain takes up less space. Trained first in drawing and painting during my undergraduate degree, I have since reconciled my body's protest of long days spent in the studio and have moved my practice into my home. With built-in breaks for movement, stretching, soaking in the tub and chairs with heating pads, pillows and blankets, I create in quick bursts integrated within my living. I prefer to work with what is immediately available to me. Non-precious materials such as Crayola markers and cheap sketchbook paper make drawing easier for I am less concerned with making errors, resulting in a freer hand to explore my ideas with. As drawing is a tool that helps me to slow myself down by bringing me back into the sensations of my body, creating visual representations of its invisible symptoms provides a helpful mental distance from pain's discomfort.

When the pain is high I exist within the walls of my body. Try as I might to be present in the outside world, pain is insistent in its yelling, leaving me no choice but to head inside to try to locate, spend time and communicate with it. At night, I keep the lights out, conducting pain studies by drawing the sensations that I feel inside myself on large-scale paper in front of me. Use a hand-triggered counter to track the number of times that pain demanded I look at it that day, contort my body into new positions to understand pain's pathways, record myself speaking through its seizes and sears in the hope that I may stumble upon the words, the sounds, the thing that still evades me. Less concerned by the outcomes or products created through engaging in these pain studies, I instead use them as a place of media ideation and pain management; an opportunity to find ways to inhabit pain outside of simply suffering it. Moving between media and approach,

Fig. 17: *What is the Shape of This Problem,* Louise Bourgeios, 1999
Figure Removed due to copyright restrictions. The information removed is a photograph of Bourgeios' "What is the Shape of this Problem" showing pairs of nine drawings and accompanying text led with a title card.
https://www.marlboroughnewyork.com/exhibitions/louise-bourgeois-what-is-the-shape-of-this-problem#tab:slideshow;tab-1:slideshow

what starts as a thought becomes a note becomes a photograph becomes a digital collage becomes a video becomes a drawing as its thinking grows and evolves. Sometimes only a slight shift from the piece that came before it and other times a dramatic departure, I find thinking across media to be helpful in setting off chains of reactions that wouldn't be possible while working within just one.

Despite being best known for her large-scale sculptures and installation art, Louise Bourgeois had a prolific drawing and writing practice throughout her life.[36] Her way of working between media, iterating and building upon ideas as they took on different forms within her work has always resonated with me. In *What is The Shape of This Problem,* a series of nine paired lithograph and typeface diptychs, this question, presented as an introduction to the following pairs of image and text, gestures to the ways she thought about her making. The prints, abstract images whose forms seem to suggest knots and webs in red and black ink pair with cryptic written musings that explore themes ranging from torment and revenge to hope and repair. At times, appearing in conversation with the paired image and at others, offering a less straightforward connection, Bourgeois' inclusion of text provides us with insight into her inner world and emotions, while opening the door for us to contemplate our own associations to the themes that she calls up.

Beginning as written musings about the ways that pain was inhabiting my body, I conducted a series of fifteen text-based drawings titled, *Pain Hurts!* to illustrate a group of cell phone notes that I collected over the span of several months. Considering the failings of language in articulating experiences of pain, I was struck by my inability to describe the sensations I was confronted with without relying on metaphor and began using my written notes as drawing prompts to further explore my words through image making. Working in this emergent manner, each time I found myself with pain, I looked to reframe my experience, hoping to better understand and communicate the sensations in my body by considering them through new associations. With each drawing, I imagined pain's way of being; the ways that it inhabited the space that is my body and at times, extended past it, the different shapes and disguises it took on when it came knocking. These drawings became a place for me to sit with pain and humour simultaneously, a series of self-portraits and accompanying text rendered playfully in bright colours, reminiscent of children's drawings.

In *Pain is the Pea,* my crudely drawn likeness sits upon a stack of mattresses, kept awake by pain; expressed through dashed red and yellow lines emitting from my body and from a pea, hidden beneath the mattress stack. Framed in text reading, "Pain is the Pea Under Every Mattress" this spoof on the well-known fairytale suggests the nagging persistence of pain that is chronic, showing up to disrupt despite conditions put in place to mask its presence. In a medium that refuses to be taken too seriously, this series allowed me to play with the pain I was experiencing, shifting my emotional response to it by challenging its authority by depicting it in bright colours and playful imagery. Through this body of work, I hope to suggest that there is more to a life with chronic pain than just suffering. I have found that through expanding the ways that we talk about and engage *with* pain, we can continue to expand upon the ways that we embody it as well.

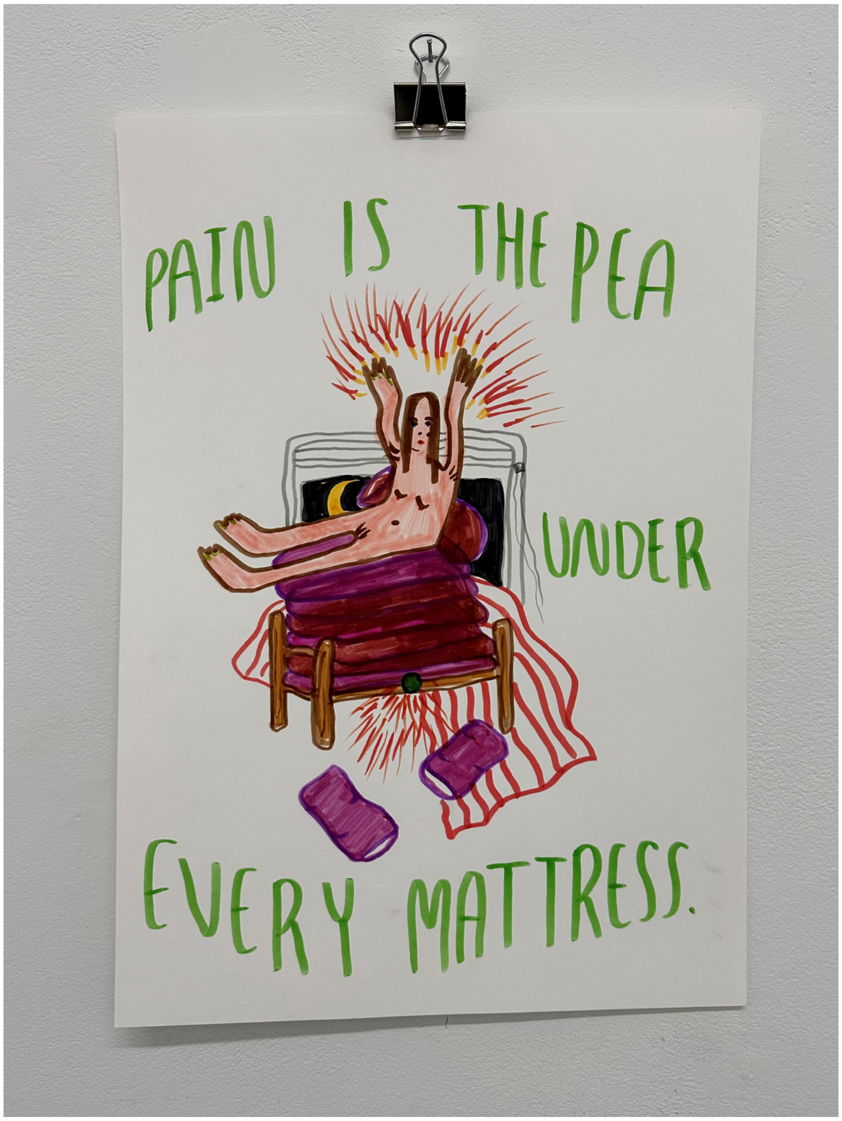


Fig.18: *Pain is the Pea,* 2022

An arrival takes time, and the time that it takes shapes "what" it is that arrives. The object could even be described as the transformation of time into form, which itself could be redefined as the "direction" of matter. What arrives not only depends on time, but is shaped by the conditions of its arrival, by how it came to get here. Think of a sticky object; what it picks up on its surface "shows" where it has traveled and what it has come into contact with. You bring your past encounters with you when you arrive.

- Sara Ahmed
Queer Phenomenology

Fig.19: *Residues, Pain Studies*, 2022

PAIN STUDIES (A KINDER PLACE)

I came to the concept of residues while documenting and collecting on my walks. Drawn to posters wheat-pasted onto signposts, bleached by sun and rain, returned entirely back to white, I felt the need to photograph them without understanding the impulse behind it. Scratched-out stickers, cracks in the concrete, ripples of paint built up in layers upon each other; I didn't know why I was collecting these images, they didn't make for interesting photographs on their own, but I felt the need to do so all the same. I documented similar marks around my house, photographing holes in the walls, scratches following the swing-path of doors, and grease stains left on the cabinets in the kitchen. Over time I started calling them residues, thinking of them as the trace left over following a set of prior events, actions or traumas. A persistent mark remaining, these quiet moments of residual material memory stood out to me in the ways that they mimicked the marks of chronic illness left within my body.

I've since come to understand my collected body of archives as the residues of practice, of time spent. As my motivations for creating art are rarely product-driven, I instead seek full engagement within my embodied thinking practice where art-making offers itself as the ideal tool. While some say that *practice makes perfect,* I prefer to look at it as *practice makes*. In viewing my art as residues and rejecting the notion of perfection within my making, it is not to say that my works are not intentional, or that they lack aesthetic decision-making. It is more so that I have created the right conditions within my practice to generate results that illustrate a material journey and its accompanying thinking process. I see these residues as time stamps, as moments within a greater chain of reactions, a finishing point for one thought and a spark of new beginning for the next.

In her book, *The Creative Process: Learn it and Use it for Life,* dancer and choreographer, Twyla Tharp writes, "There is no one ideal condition for creativity. What works for one person is useless for another. The only criterion is this: Make it easy on yourself. Find a working environment where the prospect of wrestling with your muse doesn't scare you, doesn't shut you down. It should make you want to be there, and once you find it, stick with it."[37] Through my time at Emily Carr, I have uncovered a way of working that's made it easier on myself. This is not to say that I have created an art practice capable of always providing me with distance from my pain; there are many times that I continue to find myself deep within it. What I do know, however, is that I now hold the tools to help me sit with my pain and move through it.

Through collaborating with my pain as part of an emergent embodied art practice, I have come to better understand the ways that it presents within my body. This has led me to gain insight into how to better communicate my experiences with pain to others. Through consistently engaging with the practices I've built to conduct my pain studies, the produced residues work together to provide an inside look into my experiences living with chronic illness and pain. While many of the drawings, photographs, video stills, collages and written notes could stand alone as artworks, it is only in conjunction with each other that the full impact of the process I have been engaged in can be felt. This work has arrived slowly and continues to arrive as there is no fixed destination. These practices do not end just because this program does, they move on and continue with me, to fuel the steps that I take next.

Pain Studies (A Kinder Place) is a durational exhibition that took place in Emily Carr University's Michael O'Brian Exhibition Commons over the course of 27 days. Housing the furniture, objects, and pain management devices from my bedroom, 115 drawings, 250 photographs,150 screenshot cell phone notes, and 12 bread-based sculptures created during my time at Emily Carr, as well as my own physical body, I occupied the space for the duration of the month. Struggling to curate a single exhibition that reflected the fluidity of an ever-changing painscape, allowing the installation to remain in motion provided the opportunity to depict the multifaceted nature of chronic pain. Treating the week provided on either end for the installation and de-installation of the work as part of the show itself, I was able to expand the two-week show into a month, allowing for twenty different iterations to take place during that time.

Having housed the vast majority of the practices and artworks produced over the course of my two years in grad school, it felt appropriate to begin the exhibition with the recreation of my bedroom space. Aside from my bed, the show began with the transportation and reconfiguration of all of the furniture, objects and pain management devices that made up the contents of my room. Centred within the gallery, a room comprised of one long wall and two small side walls, the space resembled a set, stage, or diorama. During my time in the MFA program, I had begun to consider the body spatially, working with the phrase, "My Body is a House and I'm Learning to Live in it." Within this exhibition, I expanded on this idea and began exploring what it meant to merge physical and psychological spaces through the blurring of internal and external worlds. The pain studies that had been created over the previous two years were the physical manifestation of time spent with the sensations of my internal world, they told stories of different moments with and in pain, mapped the shifting and changing terrains of my painscape, and communicated the overwhelm of living within chronic pain through their multitude.

Fig.20: *Pain Studies (A Kinder Place)*, 2023

Utilizing the exhibition as an opportunity for practice, I worked in an emergent way, curating the artworks into different configurations in an attempt to communicate both my experiences as a person living with chronic illness and pain, as well as the processes that I have been engaged in while conducting pain studies. Using sticky tack to hang the various drawings, photographs and notes, I was able to efficiently install and take down the various components as I worked.

During the exhibition, I exercised the care-based rituals of stretching, movement and dancing that previously took place within the privacy of my bedroom walls. Despite the presence of a viewer, I chose to frame these actions for myself as *practicing publicly* as opposed to performing for those watching, thus maintaining the function of each action as a pain management tool within my greater practice. Now on display for the public to view, these practices were both an act of vulnerability and defiance; an invitation to bear witness to the intimate processes required to care for a body with pain and an assertion that caring for a sick body need not be hidden from the public gaze.

Fig.21: *Pain Studies (A Kinder Place)*, 2023

As the work required long hours spent standing on concrete within the gallery, it was crucial that I maintained these practices to help mitigate the impact that I felt within my body. Having pushed past my limits following the first week of the show, upon reflection, I developed a daily routine to ensure the exhibition remained physically sustainable.

Beginning each day, I went for a walk, collecting my thoughts on the actions of the day prior, while easing my body back into motion. A period of reflection, these walks provided space to begin responding to the public engagement I had observed the previous day. Writing in my notes app, I reflected on what each iteration was communicating and which elements needed to be introduced, modified or rearranged in order to convey that day's intended message.

From there, I sat by the ocean, allowing myself to slow. As so much of this process was dependent on fast-paced intuitive decision-making, it was important to grant myself opportunities to be still. Despite seeming small, this proved to be one of the most valuable practices I engaged with during the exhibition for it provided pause, both of body and mind, prior to returning to the gallery space. On the days that it was raining and this practice was not possible, I found it took me longer to settle back into my work.

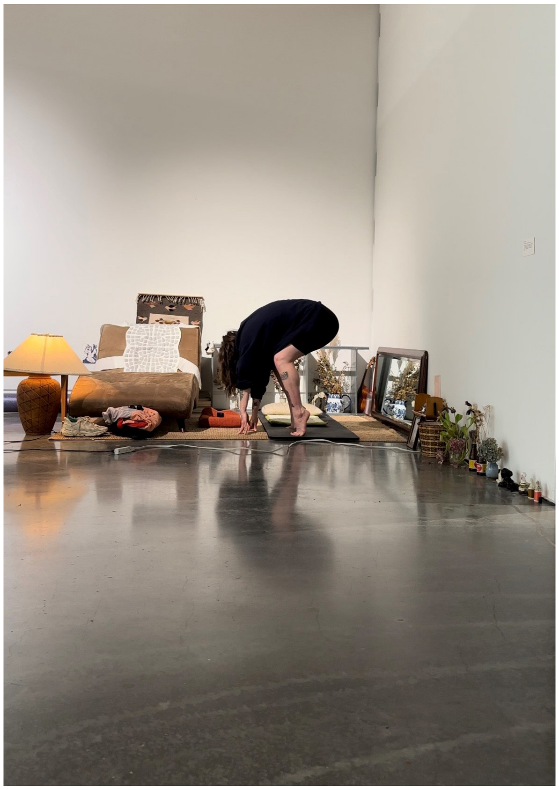


Fig.22: *Pain Studies (A Kinder Place)*, 2023

Upon arriving in the gallery, I would begin engaging in my intuitive stretching practice, allowing my body to dictate the types and successions of movements that it required. Massaging rub A535 onto my sore muscles, a scent distinctly associated with bodily aches, I infused the smell of pain into the gallery space. Often lasting for an hour or two, this stretching practice was fundamental in reversing the pain and stiffness that my body held from the day(s) prior. Again, a period of reflection and sustained slowness, my time spent stretching in the exhibition allowed me to inhabit the previous day's installation, formulating a plan for the next iteration while simultaneously settling back into practicing within the public eye.

Once complete, I would finally begin working on that day's installation. Throughout the duration of the exhibition, the furniture remained a tether to the literal physical space. Moving around the gallery, different configurations told different stories. At times, the furniture arrangement resembled the actual layout of my bedroom that it was referencing. At other moments, it was restricted, forced onto the footprint of the carpet mimicking the way that pain seizes or laid on its side, contained below hip height, the part of my body that was currently giving me the most trouble. I saw the furniture as the backbone to the rest of the work, it became the set that I inhabited while practicing things like dancing and stretching, created an environment for the photographs, notes, drawings, and bread sculptures to engage with, and was an anchor to comfort as the intensity of pain built.

Upon initially bringing my furniture into the space, I was met with the immediate response of, "Wow, cute apartment!" from those viewing the work. Despite continuously adding elements over the course of the first week that upon closer investigation would have signalled that the work was about pain, I was struck by its continual invisibility. Drawings depicting my body within pain's contortions, photographs and notes tracking its ever-changing frequencies, watercolour lines and shapes mapping the terrains of my internal world, these pain studies built and still, people stopped to take selfies in the mirror, posed on the chaise lounge, smiled and laughed with their friends, and carried on. This was intriguing to me as it mimicked the isolation that I have often felt when dealing with an invisible illness. I began exploring installation strategies to see what it would take to clue viewers in on what the show was about; expanding and contracting the different elements of the exhibition, laying the mirror on its side in front of my yoga mat to force those looking to take photographs in its reflection to lay down as well, and finally, building up to the moment where the entire collection of my pain studies hung on the wall together.

It was at this point of having installed the entirety of my pain studies that I observed a shift in the way that viewers began to interact with the work. Paired with a set of large-scale lettered posters reading “My Pain is Alive and Takes up Space,” I watched as my audience began engaging with the work on a micro level, no longer simply taking in the composition as a whole. It was here, on the eleventh iteration of the show, with my pain literally lining the walls of the space that I inhabited, that the invisibility of pain seemed to shatter and with it, space was made for moments of connection.

Fig.23: *Pain Studies (A Kinder Place)*, 2023

Leading up to the exhibition, I was unsure about whether or not to engage with my viewers as they moved through the space. As I rejected the notion of performance and opted instead for that of practicing publicly, it felt natural to respond to those seeking discussion around the work. It was through these conversations that some of the most meaningful moments of my time spent in the gallery emerged. Conversations around pain, loss, illness and grief are rarely had between strangers, yet through creating a space to offer mine to the public, I was met with theirs in return. It was in these moments of connective communication that I was reminded of art's ability to position us to one another. To be seen in my pain, and to have others feel seen in theirs meant the work had done its job.

Fig.24: *Pain Studies (A Kinder Place)*, 2023

At the halfway point of the show, I began introducing elements that spoke to the second portion of the exhibition's title, *A Kinder Place*. As the twelfth iteration, I built a blanket fort around the furniture tucked into the corner of the gallery; a hideout from pain. Over the course of the next few days, I spent time drawing, playing ukulele and singing, reading and napping within the privacy that it offered. On the fourteenth day, I hung a series of photographs of clouds and blue skies surrounding the fort, a disruption expanding beyond the line of pain studies still hung at hip height. A signal of optimism, it was through these simple actions that I hoped to suggest that even in the depths of pain, reprieve could be found.

Fig.25: *Pain Studies (A Kinder Place),* 2023

Upon completing the day's iteration, I ended each session of work with dancing. Whether in the gallery space or in my now empty bedroom, intuitive movement once again served as an opportunity to reconnect with my body and slow down. An outlet for emotional expression, at times these dances were joyous, a celebration of all of the things my body *is* capable of. Other times, however, following the movement my body asked for led to the release of stored pain. On one of the evenings, while dancing particularly hard within the gallery, I was flooded with emotion and instinctually began ripping at the lettered posters reading *"My Pain is Alive and Takes up Space"* before ending up in a heap, crying on the gallery floor. Taken off guard by my display of raw and unfiltered pain, I took a moment to compose myself before looking up at the wall which now read, *"My Pain is Alive*." The poignancy of this residual phrase, left following an unplanned burst of emotive action, was one of many moments that encouraged me to continue allowing myself to be guided by gut-based embodied knowledge. In lacking the time to question whether or not these types of actions were correct, and instead, trusting that I could reflect and respond to the conditions as they changed, at times, it was as though the work was alive and I had become the tool that it emerged though.

Fig.26: *Pain Studies (A Kinder Place)*, 2023

Fig.27: *Pain Studies (A Kinder Place)*, 2023

During the final days of the show, I introduced my bread-based sculptures to the exhibition, creating a third rendition of *Help or Hinder Hard to Say*. Now more than a year and a half old, some of the pieces crumbling, brittle and worn out, the bread rested amongst equally tired pain management devices. Burnt-out heating pads and torn wheat bags with their scorched kernels from countless microwave sessions spilled and resting, they lay, supported by the furniture they inhabited in their working days. Once posed upon white plinths, sat within the stark, clean cube of the gallery, this third iteration of the work offered comfort to tired forms as they adorned the domestic space they now found themselves in.

Fig.28: *Pain Studies (A Kinder Place)*, 2023

A brittle, thread-mended loaf sat centred on the coffee table, resting between two bouquets of tulips in varied stages of decay. Under the warm glow of my bedroom lamp, surrounded by fallen petals, this composition served as a reminder; despite the care that we provide, clinging to the idea of preservation is an unattainable and needless goal. This notion of breaking down as a point of potential, a reoccurring theme seen through many lenses within the entirety of my thesis exhibition, once again offers the opportunity for metamorphosis as a resistance to the impulse to cling to things as they once were. Whether the building up of drawings to be torn down the next day to express a new idea, bread as a medium that all but promises to decay, the corners of drawings, now slightly crumpled and less pristine than when they entered the gallery or the wear now present on my furniture, returned to my room upon the completion of the exhibition, these things tell the stories of an event, a life, of something that once happened. A residual tradeoff to have lived in motion, perhaps the value of the work lives in its recognition of its own temporality.

In one final moment of serendipity, upon wanting to create a second set of lettered posters reading, *"Taking Care of a Sick Body is an Art,"* I realized that the phrase contained the exact amount of letters as its predecessor, *"My Pain is Alive and Takes up Space."* Flipping over the now crumpled and torn posters, I drew out the new letters on the reverse side. Hung beside a column of nineteen photographs of the previous iterations that took place within the space, this final installment of *Pain Studies (A Kinder Place)* was the meta-reflection of both the work that had taken place within the gallery over the course of the month as well as the development of a sustainable art practice that I had been engaged over the two years prior. It is not an exaggeration to say that embarking on the process

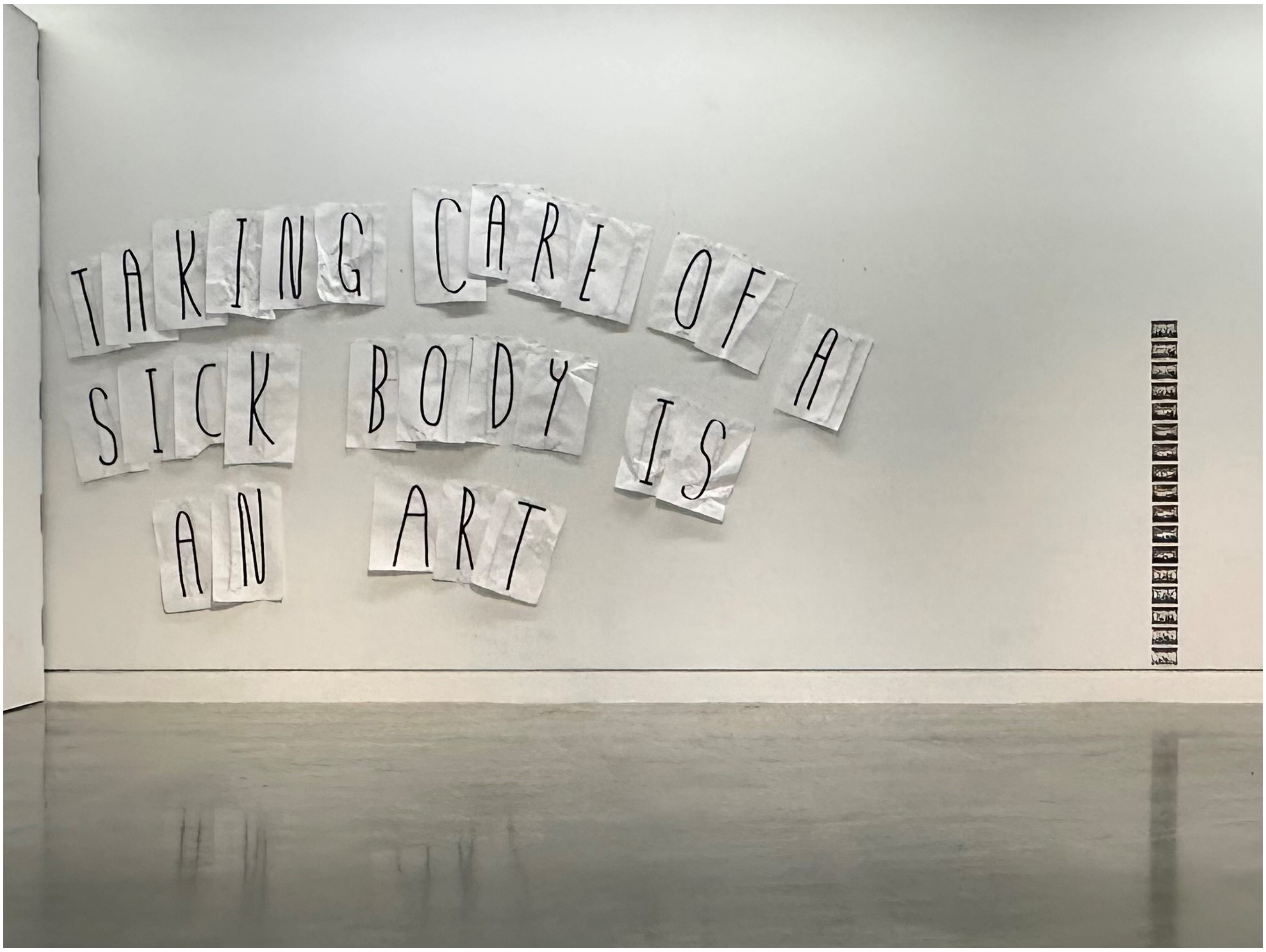


Fig.29: *Pain Studies (A Kinder Place)*, 2023

of creating this lived art practice has transformed my relationship with pain. In acknowledging the care required to maintain my health as an art in and of itself, it has granted me the freedom to dissolve the illusion of perceived stagnancy within a diagnosis of chronic. Instead, my journey with health remains in motion. No longer seeking an arrival, I work instead, to build a kinder place. One of many, perpetual in motion, inside and outside of myself, the work is never finished. In letting art be the tool used to direct my living, I continue to move, in the general direction of forward.

Beginning her career as a commercial photographer, Jo Spence developed the technique of ‘photo therapy’ upon her diagnosis of breast cancer.[38] Using photography as a therapeutic method to gain agency over the disease that she was battling, Spence’s photographs document and make visible the private experience of navigating sickness and play out a reenacted personal history as a means of revisiting and releasing one’s self from traumatic life experiences.

In The *Final Project*, a collaboration with Terry Dennett, Spence documented the process of dying from cancer over the course of two years. In *Sandwiched Portraits 3* a portrait of Spence taken from her previous archive is superimposed with images of natural decay, seeming to suggest a process of returning to nature.[39] Standing in for her own image in many of the other photographs within this series, Spence staged skeletons in wigs, holding cameras, posing in graveyards and closed shop windows as a sort of auto-therapeutic investigation into her own dying.”[40] Perhaps most striking, when viewing Spence’ archive of photographs following her terminal diagnosis is the playful approach she took to embodying her illness even in the face of death. With her ability to reconstruct the narrative around *life’s hardest things* as something only to be suffered, Spence reminds us that within pain, lies many other things as well.

Fig. 30: Jo Spence, *The Final Project, Various 7,* 1991-1992
Figure Removed due to copyright restrictions. The information removed is a photograph of Spence’s “The Final Project, Various 7” where a skeleton can be seen hanging in a storefront with a ‘closed’ sign across its abdomen https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2016/feb/16/photographer-jo-spence-the-final-project

I've heard hope referred to as a discipline and have come to recognize joy as something to be practiced. I have found that the more playful the approach that I can bring to my time spent with pain, the more success I have in transforming it into something else. "Some people might ask, why choose to feel?"[41] writes Alta Starr. "Why choose aliveness and presence when that means choosing to be awake not only to joy but also to pain? [...] By welcoming the difficult no less wholeheartedly than the delightful, you can come back to life."[42] By using art as a tool to sit with pain, I've come to observe a strange phenomenon; the further that I've allowed myself to look within pain's depths, the higher my capacity for creating joy within them.

Fig.31: *Pain Studies (A Kinder Place)*, 2023

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