

Collaging an Accessible World:  
Building Lady a Playground

By

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*Figure 1 Collaged silkscreen print on paper, 2023, Emily De Boer*

## Acknowledgements

To the land,

Thank you, I am beyond grateful to live and play on here. My art practice is situated on stolen, traditional, and ancestral territories of the x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əyəm (Musqueam), Sk̓wxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish) and səlilwətaʔł (Tsleil-Waututh) peoples. Throughout this document I discuss my practice of collecting and claiming space. Practices of claiming on stolen land have a massive potential for catastrophic harm, my process of claiming is one of photography and pilfering from those I believe are implementing harm on marginalized communities. I care deeply about the community and streets with which I rebuild into radically inclusive spaces.

To my community,

Thank you to my cohort. These last eighteen months I have learned to trust my instincts and indulge in play. I have learned how to take up and alter space. I cannot believe how lucky I am that I get to learn from, and with, you all.

Thank you to Kai Liu for letting me borrow your electric stapler, your hammer, your tape, your reach and whatever else I needed.

Thank you to those who listened to my ramblings, those studio visits have changed my life.

Thank you to the crows for reminding me to go home. Thank you to Dolce and Benjamin for welcoming me once I did.

Thank you to my mom for the endless support. You continue to supply everything I need to accomplish my dreams.

And thank you to my dad, everything I know about building playgrounds I learnt from you.







*Figure 2 My Childhood playground I built with my dad when I was three.*



*Figure 3 My dad and I taking a break during its construction.*

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## **Introduction (building a playground for Lady)**

Taking up space is not possible if you cannot access it in the first place. My body has not been considered in the construction of our world; my practice rejects this discrimination. With a profound embodied knowledge of exclusionary architecture from the daily navigation of hostile infrastructure, I have decided to reimagine how space could function when access and inclusion are prioritized.

Developing strategies that allow me to access spaces that do not consider my body, my practice is the cathartic processing of this discriminatory exclusion. Through the claiming of the street and the endlessly ephemeral moments existing in that space, this material is used in the reimagined construction of the accessible worlds I build within the gallery. Made accessible through the claiming and manipulation of this material, Lady is able to navigate these worlds without limitations. Lady, who is my alter ego, travels throughout and has made a home in each world that I build. She is on a mission to take up space, she would like people to consider her, she would like to take over.



## **Research Questions**

My work questions the ways in which lived experience can inform an art practice. Specifically, how does my body, and my fascination with the inaccessibility of the street, inform how I make space for play and worldbuilding? Like graffiti writers, I am interested in claiming space in a world of inaccessibility and discrimination.

This is made manifest through experiments with photography, collage, sculpture and print. How can I draw on my lived experience to create alternate worlds with these collected

materials? I then ask how these worlds can then be brought together through installations that further question access by manipulating the institutional space of the gallery.



*Figure 4 Lady on collaged cedar block, 2023, Emily De Boer*

This thesis project is the construction of a playground for my alter-ego Lady. In this paper I will describe how I worldbuild using different mediums; how photography, collage, sculpture, and printmaking are used as tools for worldbuilding<sup>1</sup> installations within the gallery. I rely on chance and the anonymous collaboration of the street to source my worldbuilding materials. I have developed a collection of the street that works as source, as the building materials to use in the construction of new worlds. Through this recording of the city, I begin to worldbuild a future history, one that speaks to what our environment could be

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<sup>1</sup> Worldbuilding defined as the construction of a new, fictional, often idealized place using elements from the real world.



like: inclusive, caring, decolonized and accessible. Having Lady able to exist in this imaginary, idealized world allows me to play uninhibited in this potential world. While Lady roams freely within the installation, viewers are manipulated within the gallery, asking them to consider their navigation.

Lady is a leitmotiv,<sup>2</sup> a character that manifests in different shapes through each medium and form of my work. Appearing in each world I build, she exists in many forms: she is a block, a breezeblock motif in print, a ready-made cement breezeblock, and myself in human form.

Lady, as seen through the writing of this paper, has a mind of her own, the ability to move throughout space, and can manipulate the movements of others. She is about change and radical inclusion; she is disappointed in discrimination and how normalized exclusion is. She just wants to play; she wants to learn and explore and love her community. Lady and I are one and the same and throughout this paper can be understood as interchangeable.



## **How My Lived Experiences Help Lady Understand Access**

I have an embodied understanding of accessibility because of my lived experience as a person who uses a wheelchair to navigate my every day. Existing in a body that is often not considered within the urban landscape, I grapple with this discrimination daily. Since the age of eleven I have been using a wheelchair to navigate the world around me. Encountering barriers and arduous environments is an everyday occurrence. I understand the plight caused by hostile architecture; how this exclusion quickly turns sadness to anger. I am perpetually

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<sup>2</sup> Leitmotiv is a “dominant or reoccurring theme” defined by Merriam Webster Dictionary here: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/leitmotif>

confused about how the daily execution of this discrimination isn't more widely understood as deplorable.

I navigate a city that is hostile towards certain bodies, we all do. It isn't accessible to those with disabilities or those without financial means. I see an exponential overhaul of buildings. They are torn down to be quickly replaced by large boring concrete rectangles. I mean no offence to the architects, there is only so much you can do when you design for profit and not humanity. It feels as though it is not dilapidation that necessitates the demolition, but greed. With gentrification<sup>3</sup> there is the potential for positive change, building code has the potential to be a rule book for inclusion and yet we are still fighting for ramps into buildings, accessible washrooms, and housing.

If you are lucky, you will live long enough to experience disability or love someone who does. People with disabilities are the largest and most intersectional minority group, "Almost 2.7 million people or 1 in 10 Canadians aged 15 and older had a mobility disability in 2017, making it one of the most common disability types"<sup>4</sup> and yet accessibility so often feels like the last priority. I am not an angry person, but I am also not naïve, and this is an intensely frustrating phenomenon to be constantly enduring. This upheaval makes access to space all the more precarious. There are solutions to this plight, they just require imaginative thinking.

When buildings are inaccessible there is a crip erasure at work that mirrors the building erasure and subsequent exclusion caused by gentrification happening in our cities. I am rejecting both as they cause detrimental distress for so many bodies. Rooted in activism,

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<sup>3</sup> Gentrification is the infiltration of money into a community that then forces that community out. It is the development of an area desired for its location and cultural value that is then erased through attempts to clean, modernize, and profit from its desirability. Those that initially resided in these neighborhoods are displaced creating an even larger housing crisis. A more detailed definition of gentrification can be seen here:

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gentrification>

<sup>4</sup> Stats Canada "A profile of Canadians with a mobility disability and groups designated as visible minorities with a disability" December 2020. More information can be found here:

<https://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/sc/video/profile-canadians-mobility-disability-sign-language>

both graffiti and my practice of worldbuilding exemplify this practice of defying erasure. Shayda Kafai explains that “to create from this activist place results in self-discovery and love. There is a remaking of the world here, too. Art becomes another medium through which disabled, queer of colour bodyminds<sup>5</sup> can generate new, liberatory pathways on which to travel”<sup>6</sup>. It is in this way, graffiti and inclusive, reimagined, disabled worldbuilding is an appeal to be seen, to defy erasure.

The book *Crip Kinship* by Shayda Kafai provides an intersectional perspective of disability justice and activism through art. Published in 2021 it is a current and spectacularly diverse depiction of very poignant issues within the disabled community. The essay “Art Making as Evidence”<sup>7</sup> among many others in their book has critically validated my lived experiences as a disabled maker. Describing the experience of being denied access, Kafai weaves together the nuance of racial, LGBTQIA+, class, and ableist discrimination while also describing the impact art has had on transcending our bodyminds.

Within disability discourse there is an intense desire for accessibility, obviously, but the world's refusal to accommodate us has turned us to our imaginations. Because the able-bodied idea of access is more insistent on curing the disabled body than making accommodations for everyone and their quirky, confusing, dissonant abilities, we have found other ways to access space. Creative imagining, dreaming, allows us to build an accessible world of our own creation: “in dreaming, our communities materialize a world where through fury and love, transformation in all its rebelliousness thrives”<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Bodyminds is a term used within disability discourse to reject the notion that our minds and bodies are experienced separately. What exists in our imagination is experienced by our bodies, what affects our bodies informs our knowledge, they are unified.

<sup>6</sup> Shayda Kafai *Crip Kinship* “Introduction” page 17.

<sup>7</sup> Shayda Kafai *Crip Kinship* “Art Making as Evidence” page 87.

<sup>8</sup> Shayda Kafai *Crip Kinship* “Introduction” page 17

This rebellion is what drives my creativity, the observation of others' and my own. I am drawn to the everyday<sup>9</sup> rebellion of graffiti, the beauty in the random, even the obstructive; I have "a desire to bring these overlooked aspects of lived experience into visibility"<sup>10</sup> through the cathartic manipulation of them. I am constantly inspired by the energy and materiality of urban streets; the constant evolution and ephemerality of each corner has always garnered my adoration. I am fascinated by demonstrations of navigation and the acquisition of spaces that are increasingly out of reach within the city. Graffiti writers and I share the desire to take up and claim space, our commitment taking shape in similar but differing ways. Regardless this "commitment to the everyday... [gives] a voice to those silenced by dominant discourses and ideologies"<sup>11</sup>, when we begin to appreciate, question, and alter what we have grown accustomed to, we begin to see how change is possible.

I have been repeatedly denied access to space in the past, this thesis project is an act of taking it back and making it mine. Alison Kafer writes in *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, "impairments aren't disabling, social and architectural barriers are."<sup>12</sup> There is nothing wrong with my body, it is the environment and hostile architecture around it that debilitates me. Disability can<sup>13</sup> be defined as "A disability is any condition of the body or mind (impairment) that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to do certain activities (activity limitation) and interact with the world around them"<sup>14</sup>. Within this

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<sup>9</sup> The everyday, meaning the seemingly inconsequential details that may not garner the most attention, or be conventionally attractive, but upon closer inspection can be seen as beautiful.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Johnstone, White Chapel, The Everyday "Introduction // Recent Art and the Everyday" 12

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Johnstone, White Chapel, The Everyday "Introduction // Recent Art and the Everyday" 13

<sup>12</sup> Alison Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip* "Introduction" 7

<sup>13</sup> I caution anyone defining a term that is relatively undefinable in its nature. Everyone with a disability will have their own understanding of disability. This definition is not my own but speaks to my experience being perceived as a person with a disability.

<sup>14</sup> Disability defined by The CDC's (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). More information can be found here:

[https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/disability.html#:~:text=A%20disability%20is%20any%20condition,around%20them%20\(participation%20restrictions\).](https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/disability.html#:~:text=A%20disability%20is%20any%20condition,around%20them%20(participation%20restrictions).)



definition itself there is blame placed on my body, but I urge you to consider why it is *my* body that is the problem and not the infrastructure that was built to exclude me.

I am intrinsically cynical and frightened by those who have the power to change our world and yet do nothing. In my practice, I have found that through a claiming of the streets through photography, and the construction of a new composition through collage, I am able to process and come to terms with the injustices that manifest on the street. As a direct rejection of this exclusion, I worldbuild crip<sup>15</sup>-centric liberated zones<sup>16</sup>.

Negotiating these precarious environments takes careful observation and consideration of seemingly insignificant and precarious details. When an awkward sidewalk bump can turn a casual stroll into a projectile happening, small details become crucial to consider. I have made a practice out of observing the smallest of details and building an environment out of them. Lady gets to navigate these built environments; she gets to claim space through her repeated form. In my practice I have started calling attention to who is being excluded. In a pursuit to take back the city,<sup>17</sup> graffiti writers and I share this contempt for inaccess and actively refuse the rules for acquiring space. We have developed a rebellion, born from this exclusion, an ill contempt for those in power. Our attitude has shifted about the way we interact with public space, since the consequences are no worse than the actual treatment, we no longer fear them.




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<sup>15</sup> “Crip” short for cripple, has been reclaimed through the disability rights movement as a way of rejecting the shame, stereotypes and misconceptions about our abilities perpetuate. Crip typically refers to people with physical disabilities but through its reclamation has begun to encompass all people with disabilities. For more information on crip theory see Feminist, Queer, Crip by Alison Kafer.

<sup>16</sup> Crip-centric liberated zones are spaces built by intersectional people with disabilities where they “can exist and thrive liberated from the oppressions that relegate our daily lives”. I will elaborate on how I construct crip-centric liberated zones later in this paper.

<sup>17</sup> In Bomb It the graffiti documentary from 2008, a graffiti writer says “we’re not asking for the space, we’re taking the space” (2:00 <https://bombit-themovie.com/>) this rebellious claiming is an ethos I share in both the repeated graffiti bomb-like quality and in my collection of the street that I will describe later in more detail.



*Figure 5 Photograph of access achieved, 2023, Emily De Boer*

## **Material Research Methodology**

My research and processes of inquiry looks at the role of collage within art history as a way of appropriating media to create a new, critical work responding to society. It investigates the role of installations as sites to consider in relation to one's body. It explores the ways in which various mediums offer crucial worldbuilding material in the curation of a final worldbuilt installation. It investigates the everyday, the politics of space, the hostility of architecture and the role of collage to reimagine the world, to rebuild an inherently accessible alternative.

My research methodology follows my artistic method quite closely and tells me where I should focus my energy. The source of my collages come as a result of my wandering the city. As a flaneur, someone who wanders the city making, often cynical, observations, I am perpetually observing the world around me. As a photographer, I capture what I am most drawn to, what I wish to collect and manipulate into a collage. The diverse media that I work with is not dissimilar to the diversity of my research. It is similarly eclectic and instinctual. It is YouTube deep dives, key word searches that take me down internet rabbit holes, physical books, essays, magazines, and the footnotes within those works that interest, inspire or influence my work compositionally.



## **Framework (the street as source for worldbuilding)**

The key ideas in my research include worldbuilding with crip theory to build crip-centric liberated zones using the hostile, inaccessible streets as source. This is the framework

upon which I build my worlds. Without an embodied understanding of debilitating architecture this thesis project would not exist. Author and disability justice activist Shayda Kafai's *Crip Kinship* describes how access denied requires art activism to create places where taking up space while disabled is seen as a beautiful, albeit a subversion of what most may consider beautiful. Understanding that this beauty is subjective I strive to document my understanding; I believe it is the ephemeral attempts people make in the city to claim space for themselves. The graffiti tags, stickers, and wheat pasted posters, that are ubiquitous to every street, in every city, exemplify this claiming. In a city that has made it virtually impossible to acquire space, people revert to elementary tendencies: it is yours if your name is on it.

Inherent in each of my collages is the appreciation of the mundane, the non-inherently beautiful, and the not necessarily appreciated. Each collage element is a minuscule detail from the city. Disabilities are not seen as admirable, as beautiful, but our lives and the creative maneuverings that are required to cope with inaccess and discrimination is a refusal that actively subverts traditional beauty standards. Graffiti is also seen as a subversion of what people may generally consider beautiful. Rebellion is necessary to question the structures that uphold these discriminatory beliefs, this oppression.

This subculture is made up of individuals who feel the weight of the constraining environments around them, those who are disenfranchised by those in power. Those who want to take up the space they have been systemically excluded from. *Style Wars* the 1983 documentary<sup>18</sup> depicts how it is those who feel disenfranchised turn to graffiti as a way of claiming space within a city that doesn't consider them. When you exist in a body where there are consequences to being seen, negotiating how to survive this hostility breeds rebellion. BIPOC and disabled people flock to these social circles with the hope of finding

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<sup>18</sup> The full documentary can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqUwNkr-B3k>



acceptance and solidarity. Being drawn to these subcultures myself, I am finding liberation in witnessing and capturing the graphic interruptions graffiti writers make on the city.

Investigating the nuances of access requires diligent observation. Tired of strictly considering where I cannot access, I look to those who have achieved access to the most precarious of places. Looking at how graffiti writers acquire and maintain the spaces they have claimed with their tags, I use these marks as motifs of refusal, of access despite restriction, of claiming space never meant for them. Wanting to engage in this culture myself, I claim their art and thus the space they've acquired by photographing it, collaging it, and building a new, transformed space with it.

I rely heavily on the aesthetics of the street, struck by anomalies, I am actively drawing attention to the mundane, to the unnoticed, to the undesirable. Things that may not conventionally be seen as beautiful, are highlighted. Disability is ubiquitous, and slowly occurring for everyone, but is not appreciated, and not seen as beautiful. I am actively trying to subvert this understanding as it is not mine in the slightest and perpetuates harm towards my community. In creating a world of my own out of these motifs and objects of hostility that are not traditionally seen as beautiful, I can rebuild an accessible world that is. In rejecting the architectural structures that exclude, and reimagining the streets I am building crip-centric liberated zones.



Figure 6 Photo of door with Stickers, 2023, Emily De Boer

Those who experience barriers and confront inaccessibility are forced to create strategies for accessing space, I do this by worldbuilding. Worldbuilding can be defined as the construction of a new, fictional, often idealized place using elements from the real world<sup>19</sup>. Typically related to storytelling, the role of the newly built world is to allow for the adventure and exploration of a character. This new world and its rules facilitate an escape from the often-depressing realities of the real world. In building a world out of the remnants of the places I go I can create a world for Lady to explore without limitations, without any preconceived notions about what is possible.

*Crip Kinship* talks about disability justice at large, accounting for everyone, prioritizing intersectionality over a digestible understanding of disability justice. Providing a better understanding of disabled experiences, Kafai describes how crip culture views space creation, how inclusivity is always built in. Creating a world through art making, spaces are inherently accessible through imagination.

Crip-centric liberated zones, as defined by Sins Invalid an intersectional disability justice focused performance art project, are spaces of “recognition, validation and healing”<sup>20</sup>. In an alternative way, my collaged worldbuilding are a type of crip-centric liberated zone. In creating spaces with the intention of access there is a recognition, validation, and healing in the reconstructed world. Crip-centric liberated zones are spaces built by intersectional people with disabilities where they “can exist and thrive liberated from the oppressions that relegate our daily lives”<sup>21</sup>. They are ephemeral spaces where people are themselves, free to express themselves, where we can fully affirm the power of our bodyminds<sup>22</sup>. Since no space will

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<sup>19</sup> For more information on worldbuilding see: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/what-is-world-building>

<sup>20</sup> Shayda Kafai *Crip Kinship* “Creating Crip-Centric Liberated Zones” page 51.

<sup>21</sup> Shayda Kafai *Crip Kinship* “Creating Crip-Centric Liberated Zones” 43.

<sup>22</sup> Shayda Kafai *Crip Kinship* “Creating Crip-Centric Liberated Zones” page 46.

ever be completely accessible to each body present in the space, it is in the intention of making it accessible, in the care for the experiencer, that makes these spaces revolutionary.

The role Lady plays in these worlds is a direct result of her understanding of discrimination, her experience being excluded because of her body's ability, and her rebellion against those who get to determine who is included and by extension who gets excluded. As it is widely accepted that *not everyone can be included*, it is understood that many will be excluded. The widespread societal acceptance of this disgusts Lady. She is angry that so many people are satisfied with this status quo and are unwilling to make change. She understands that change is hard to make, but she also understands that the exclusion of certain bodies is the direct result of someone else deciding that *since you can't accommodate everybody* it is thus okay to draw the line at disability<sup>23</sup>, specifically wheelchair users<sup>24</sup>. This decision to exclude is just that, a decision, placed upon people with disabilities by people in power, by those who build the infrastructure we navigate.

Lady is able to navigate this world defying inaccessibility, as inherently there are no barriers in the new world I have built. The hostility that is built into our urban landscape makes our cities unnecessarily inhospitable. The inaccessibility of most buildings, the unnecessary steps, uncovered ramps, sharp textures under overhangs, bars blocking the middle of benches, and other strategies designed for the restriction of certain bodies in certain spaces, makes life in the city unnecessarily difficult. Being completely avoidable, this is infuriating.

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<sup>23</sup> The line is absolutely not just drawn at disability. Bodies are disregarded and discriminated against due to racism and colonization at an incredibly disparate rate. In this paper I am speaking specifically to discrimination based on one's physical ability. This exclusion is made much worse when one has intersecting identities that lead to further marginalization. I am writing from my experience as a disabled, white, cisgender, settler on Turtle Island.

<sup>24</sup> Tanya Titchkosky, *The Question of Access Disability, Space, Meaning*, page 35.



When the landscape itself is precarious and uncertain, exploration becomes a way of understanding how to survive. When the stakes of my rebuilt world are not nearly as tumultuous as the real one, a liberated sense of exploration is possible. In understanding that the impulse to change, to remake comes from a dissatisfaction with the rampant inaccessible infrastructure no one seems willing to alter, it is understandable my collaged compositions have no structure but balance, this flimsy ground understood by only those accustomed to this instability. In rejecting the architectural rules that dictates, plans, and implements hostility towards certain bodies<sup>25</sup>, I have found other ways to build a world where access is attainable, where inaccess is questioned.



## Artistic Method

My artistic method is one of perpetual creativity in the studio and out, it begins with observation and ends with a never-ending experimentation. My observations are collected through photography and the acquisition of physical ready-mades whilst navigating. I use photography as a claiming, a collection, documenting the infrastructure and chance encounters I am continuously witnessing as I move within the city. Alongside my photography I collect found materials from the urban environment. In the studio I undertake the organizing of my found and photographic visual vernacular of the streets. I consider the construction of this collection the development of a personal, often anonymous, archive<sup>26</sup> of my experience navigating streets. I work through the material I have collected to combine

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<sup>25</sup> To read more about Vancouver's hostility towards houseless people see:

<https://www.vancouverisawesome.com/courier-archive/news/vancouvers-defensive-architecture-is-hostile-to-homeless-say-critics-3102287>

<sup>26</sup> The development of this thesis project tangentially cultivated a personal archive of the streets I navigate. I am invested in decolonial archival practices, my research now questioning what it means to collect material for a self-indulgent practice while on stolen land.

elements of photography, collage, sculpture, printmaking, and installation to build a new world where access is inherent to each tangible collage, where composition and precarity dictate the structure.



Figure 8 Studio process shot, 2023, Emily De Boer



Figure 7 Studio wall, 2023, Emily De Boer

My artistic method is primarily governed by the “compositional notion of play”<sup>27</sup> collage artist Helina Metaferia describes, and Stephen Nachmanovitch discusses further in *Free Play: Improvisation in Art and Life*<sup>28</sup>. He likens compulsive creative exploration to childlike wonder, unencumbered by judgement, freely exploring without consequence and criticism. He likens the studio to a recklessly propagating nature, creating so rapidly the *waste* is not seen as *waste* but as attempts at something better. When intuition, experimentation and play are at work in practice you end up creating work that looks and feels like the artist. The compulsive experimentation he describes is how my practice evolves.

<sup>27</sup> Artist Helina Metaferia describes her creative process and collage techniques in this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUOMhVwnQ98&t=682s>

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Nachmanovitch *Free Play: Improvisation in Art and Life*

Play, interruption and this sense of trial and error are central in my artistic process and installation practices. Nachmanovitch's discussion of process reflects my own artistic method. I am compelled to create something, to apply my playful yet labour-intensive processes to my strategies of worldbuilding and start the process again.



## Chance

I rely on chance and the anonymous collaboration of others on the street in the development of my building material collection. I am constantly navigating the balance between chance and control. I rely on chance, to observe something unexpected, to capture it through photography, to collect ready-mades, to respond to gallery spaces. The anticipation of a moment, and the subsequent decisive moment<sup>29</sup> Henri Cartier Bresson describes, relies on my compulsive observation of the street, my compositional intuition, and the collaboration of each form to capture the “proper expression”<sup>30</sup> of that space.

I am open to chance observations and use the Situationists concept of the Derive<sup>31</sup> to explore my cities environment in a way that recognizes the inherent community and personal connection to the infrastructure whilst I collect material. Because of chance, the potential for new connections, compositions, and spectacles<sup>32</sup> as the Situationists describe, are endless. Chance as described by flaneur photographer Richard Wentworth is the “almost literalizing

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<sup>29</sup> Henri Cartier Bresson “The Decisive Moment”

<sup>30</sup> Henri Cartier Bresson “The Decisive Moment” page 30

<sup>31</sup> For an expanded explanation of the Situationist movement see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RGJr08N-auM>

<sup>32</sup> Spectacle, as described by the Situationists “is a worldview that has actually been materialized” (Debord 7) Debord, Guy (2004 [1967]) *The Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by Ken Knabb. London: Rebel Press. Available online: <http://rebels-library.org/files/socie...>



[of] the coincident,”<sup>33</sup> the documentation of the spontaneous event within the confines of control. The clicking of my cameras capture, the availability of a ready-made and the decision to claim is the extent of my control over my collection. The rest is up to the collaboration of those on the street before me and the possibility of what the lens or my hands might capture at that particular moment.



Figure 9 Photograph documenting chance, 2023, Emily De Boer



Figure 10 Photograph documenting chance, 2023, Emily De Boer



<sup>33</sup> Richard Wentworth *Making Do and Getting By* page 14.



## Photography (claiming building material)

Photography is where my playful, compulsive creativity begins. Photographs are source for my collages, and in taking the pictures myself I am able to control, while relying on chance, what I will later collage. Photography allows “the agency of chance to bring about the unexpected”<sup>34</sup>. The aesthetics documented are those that do not necessarily get highlighted, these as accidental, more organic, everyday aesthetics that occur when someone intervenes on a space. I take photographs of urban motifs like, business facades, graffiti, homes, doors, fences, dumpsters, and signage, stairs, roadblocks, and thomassons<sup>35</sup>, these compositions are documented, cut-up and collaged to compose a new place.



*Figure 11 Photograph of wall, 2023, Emily De Boer*



*Figure 13 Photograph of thomasson, 2023, Emily De Boer*



*Figure 12 Photograph of wall, 2023, Emily De Boer*

<sup>34</sup> White Chapel *Chance*, The Aesthetics of Chance, Iversen, page 23

<sup>35</sup> An architectural element that has been preserved yet serves no function. They are now understood as conceptual art. <https://www.messynessychic.com/2017/01/18/the-inexplicably-fascinating-secret-world-of-thomassons/>

Movement and the chance of documentation are integral aspects of my work, they are also for collector and artist Bobby Puleo<sup>36</sup>. Puleo collects garbage from New York's streets, the abundance he collects is then organized into groups of nine of the same objects<sup>37</sup>. He is drawn to packaging, lighters, nail clippers and other obscure littered anomalies he finds on the street. We share the same impulse to collect mundane elements from the street that capture our attention, filter these collections, and create something out of this abundance. This urge to collect before it is gone and the burden of feeling as though you are responsible for capturing it before its inevitable destruction is something we must grapple with. It is an exciting, powerful, impulse, to decide what is recorded, to worldbuild a future history.

Travelling across cities I document their streets, the unique, dilapidated businesses and homes being slated for demolition and the anonymous, to most, graffiti tags that adorn these structures within the city. My photographs are not beholden to rigid requirements but instead rely heavily on chance and my perspective to capture an ideal composition. In a similar way to my photographs, Puleo is making the same impulsive decisions about what to collect and what to leave behind. These collections and the decisions involved in their capture are integral to the outcome of the work.

Bobby Puleo and I rely on chance to build typographies of our cities. I am interested in his shared desire to collect the undesirable, the disappearing. Our nature to compulsively commit our subject allows for an abundance that is necessary for a comprehensive foundation for worldbuilding. Relying on chance to depict our worlds, it is crucial we are constantly observing and collecting, as these chance anomalies make for surprises that later become integral to the rebuilt world.




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<sup>36</sup> A London Mudlark meets a New York StreetLark - The Streets of New York City are Bobby Puleo's River  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SdmcdVVoJRk&t=29s>

<sup>37</sup> See his compositions here: [https://www.instagram.com/gutter\\_gallery/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/gutter_gallery/?hl=en)

## Collage (a manipulation of structures)

The history of collage as medium further validates why I am drawn to the medium. Rooted in a critique of the status quo, collage is a medium intrinsically involved in the critique of the everyday, a questioning of the mainstream, an appropriation and destruction of the mass produced. Inherent in the medium is a dissatisfaction with the world and the desire to reconstruct: “photomontage creates from totally disparate elements a new unity which reveals a conceptually new image of the chaos of an age of war and revolution”<sup>38</sup>. Collage cuts up the found everyday material, and thus the politics of society, and builds anew from it.



Figure 14 Cut-ups on paper, 2023, Emily De Boer



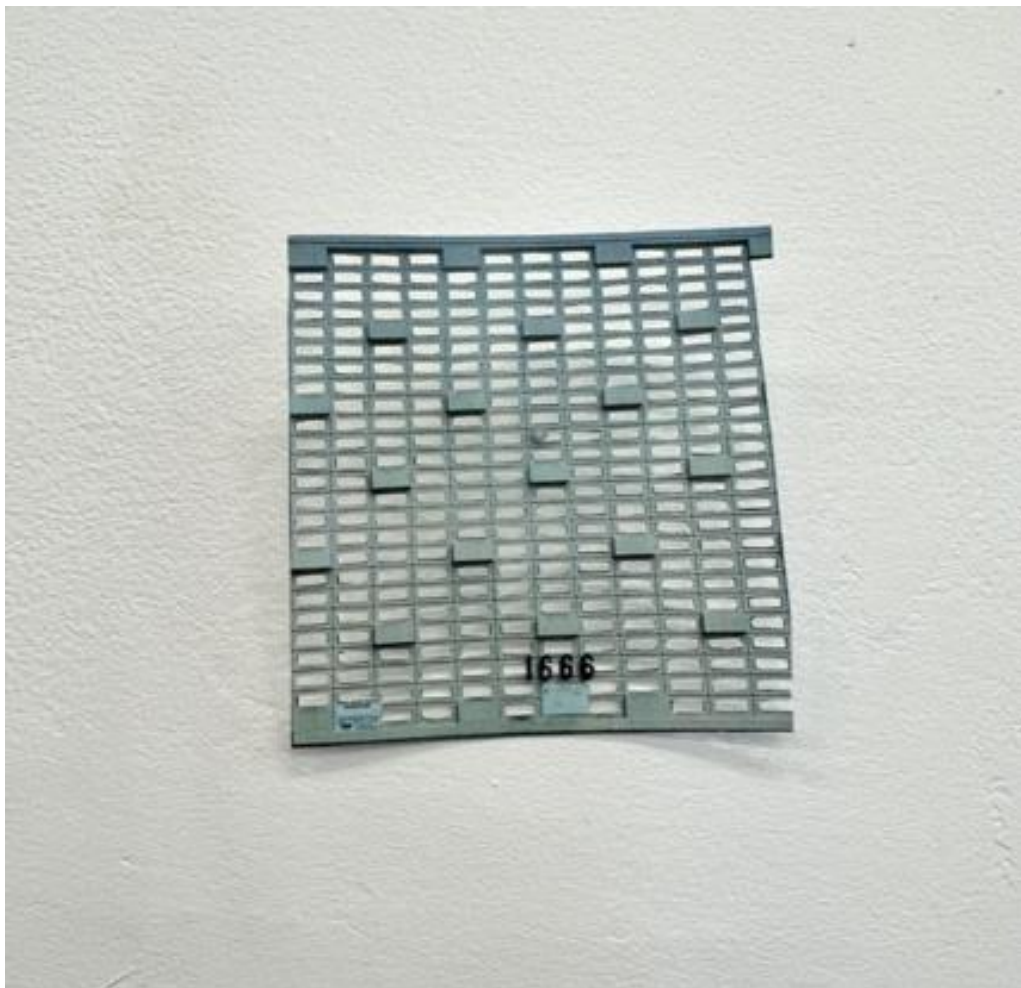
Figure 15 Cut-ups on paper, 2023, Emily De Boer

Photographs, while they tell a story themselves as individual shots, once combined and altered, create something new, something surreal. Inherent to the medium is a desire for change. Collage is a surreal construction of different places, times, and media, it is a rebuilding of the world. Grounded in the ethos of Dada, there is an inherent criticism of

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<sup>38</sup> Dada and Surrealism: Europe After the Rain documentary (1978) (16:35-16:47)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sdBaS8fgwNs&t=2071s>

society in the medium of collage, a rejection of societal norms and the preciousness that is typical of traditional art making. Lisa Wainwright, Art Historian, describes the politics of Dada in her lesson on Surrealism “German Dada and Collage”<sup>39</sup> Wainwright says dada prefers “ephemeral” materials like paper to make posters that speak to this mundane, nonhierarchical, unpolitical - and so politicized - mediums. Hannah Höch takes the mundane images from everyday magazines, cuts them up and recontextualizes them into a new, jarring environment for viewers. By its nature, collage pilfers from ready-mades, found objects and media at large to build an alternative, potentially more inclusive, world.



*Figure 16 Cut-up on wall, 2023, Emily De Boer*

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<sup>39</sup> See the full video of Lisa Wainwright’s lesson “German Dada and Collage here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyESqX84jRg>

I print out my photographs onto cardstock paper and cut them up intricately with a utility knife. My photographs are used as source for a similar process to Höch's of recontextualizing and reconstruction of environments from collected material. I extract the content from the background further separating content, patterns, text, and other collage elements from the photograph. The objects within the photographs become tangible to me through this cutting. In this way I am able to access everything within, making the world accessible to be and jarring to others. There is a care-free sense of play in my decision making when I cut and combine shapes together. This same play relies on intuition in organizing the cut-ups, this play succumbs to chance, and teaches me about my composition sensibilities.



Figure 17 Cut-up on paper, 2023, Emily De Boer



The collage artist Jennifer Williams and I share a similar visual language and processes of making. Using our own photographs as sources for our collages, it is clear we are drawn to the city motifs that surround us. Williams has begun to organize her photographs into manipulated series', be they digitally cut up, enlarged, cropped, regardless, they are collaged and displayed as objects removed from their original context. Williams and I are both drawn to colour, composition and the collection of a type, however we have a differing aesthetic sensibility despite being drawn to similar imagery and medium. She has a more maximalist approach to her final compositions whereas my collages only become complex through the accumulation of many installed together.



Figure 18 Look at the Love, 2024, Emily De Boer



In a series called *The Decorated Shed: East Village & Lower East Side*<sup>40</sup> she documents and then cuts out the restaurant vestibules from their original context. When Williams crops out all the information around the vestibule, decontextualizing the structure, she tells her viewers exactly what to look at. The shape of the structures, the sheer variety, the art on them, the patterns that adorn the edges, the materials that make the structures, the colours themselves, they are all used to illude a two-dimensional, flat composition of a building's facade.

These permanently impermanent constructions are littered with graffiti and graffiti appears where space is easily accumulated for some and not others. These temporary vestibule structures were designed to allow for profit when COVID 19 lockdown circumstances made this difficult. In states of financial vulnerability, businesses took to the claiming of space to maintain success. The ability or inability to claim space directly correlating to one's success. Through the collage and manipulation of each individual cut-out I have made the city tangible to me. In collaging these sites and building a world out of them I have gained access to that place and built a new one to navigate without limitations.



## **Blocks and Ready-Mades (as anti-architecture)**

Referencing anti-architecture<sup>41</sup>, and thus anti-inaccessibility, with my collages, I wanted my work to physically influence the space around it. I began making the printed, flat, photographs an object again. Folding the paper into cubes, building *Block City* (fig. 20) I built

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<sup>40</sup> See *East Village 21*, 2023, Jennifer Williams here: <https://jennifer-williams.com/section/525466-The%20Decorated%20Shed%20-%20East%20Village%20and%20Lower%20East%20Side.html>

<sup>41</sup> The Superstudio, an anti-architecture art collective, popularized the experimentation of radically accessible spaces. For more information see: <https://www.archdaily.com/951925/the-return-of-superstudio-and-the-anti-architecture-ideology>.

my first anti-architecture structure. I quickly realized I needed to solidify them so that they could interact with physical objects and influence space more substantially. Gluing the paper to cubed, cedar blocks I was able to build more complex sculptures through the placement of the blocks underneath heavy ready-mades (fig. 19). I collect readymade objects that I stumble upon to use as alternative methods of display. And as structures within the installations to manipulate one's navigation of the space.



*Figure 19 Cedar blocks with ready-made object, 2023, Emily De Boer*



*Figure 20 Block City, 2023, Emily De Boer*

I turn the cut-ups and collaged compositions into three dimensional collages by adhering them to wooden blocks. The six faces of the blocks themselves are made up of formal collages that rely on balance, juxtaposition and often text to create a scene. As individual blocks they feel like characters or landmarks, but they are objects to be played with, to structurally influence space, to juxtapose against the real world as a glitched or pixelated remnant of somewhere, to be installed amongst each other to create a world.

These collaged blocks are made cut-out pieces from the photographs I have taken, an eclectic blend of material collected over time, elements like cartoon comic books, artificial grass, caution tape, nails, and anything else found amusing. Each one is a place stripped of its original context, brought into a sculptural space so they can exist in a new realm. These fragments of cities are recombined to create a place that defies the conventions of architecture and thus the conventions of a city that plans its discrimination.

Lady is seen travelling throughout this installation multiple forms, as her original form of the miniature hot pink block (fig. 21), and in print form as the breezeblock motif. Attaining access to each cut-out, through the process of claiming and further through cutting it out, Lady is able to access these spaces through her repeated representation and the physical movement of the pink block over the course of the installation.



Figure 21 Studio shot of blocks, 2023, Emily De Boer

In *Block City Expanded* (fig. 22 and 23) the wall and the plinth are rejected, instead using found boxes to lift and juxtapose the collaged blocks. Referencing architecture through a display of anti-architecture, the blocks reject a structure in their precarity, balanced atop each other. In pushing the obscurity of the blocks' arrangement there is a direct rejection of uniform, structured design that follow the rules made by those in power. Those who enforce hostile architecture and inaccessibility. In rejecting the architectural structures, they dictate

appropriate for the city, how exclusionary these are for some bodies, the work is also rejecting the systematized hierarchy of bodies this infrastructure perpetuates. When the exclusion and divide of certain bodies is planned out and purposeful, there are departments in each city to uphold this oppression, it is necessary to make work that directly opposes these structures.



Figure 23 *Block City Expanded*, 2023, Emily De Boer



Figure 22 *Block City Expanded*, 2023, Emily De Boer

As the size of the blocks expand, the collages become smaller and more central in the cube as the cubes enlarge while the cut-outs remain the same size. The minimal collages are most often composed in the centre of a square, on a white piece of paper, then nailed in all four corners to a wooden block. These collages are meticulously cut out, precise, and starkly juxtaposed against another collaged element. Taking urban motifs and removing them from their original, recognizable, context further distorts reality. Viewers have a distorted understanding of the place; viewers are asked to question the system that dictates the structure of the blocks themselves.





*Figure 27 Block (detail), 2023, Emily De Boer*



*Figure 26 Block (detail), 2023, Emily De Boer*



*Figure 24 Block (detail), 2023, Emily De Boer*



*Figure 25 Block (detail), 2023, Emily De Boer*

The collaged blocks can exist in many forms. On their own, balanced atop each other, or on the wall. In *Lady's Playground*, (fig. 28) they existed on the wall. Perpendicular to the blocks on the wall there was a tree branch screwed to the wall, a pinecone adorning the extended branch and a long strand of hot pink construction flagging tape gesturing across the entire installation space, grounded in the gallery space with another assemblage of wood, a zap strap, and a nail placed precariously at the bottom of the column across from the blocks. This pink flagging tape worked as a barrier within the installation that those experiencing the work must contend with when navigating the space. This impulse to create spaces that force the viewer to move around the space and seek alternative perspectives of the work is one I continued to explore in my final thesis exhibition.

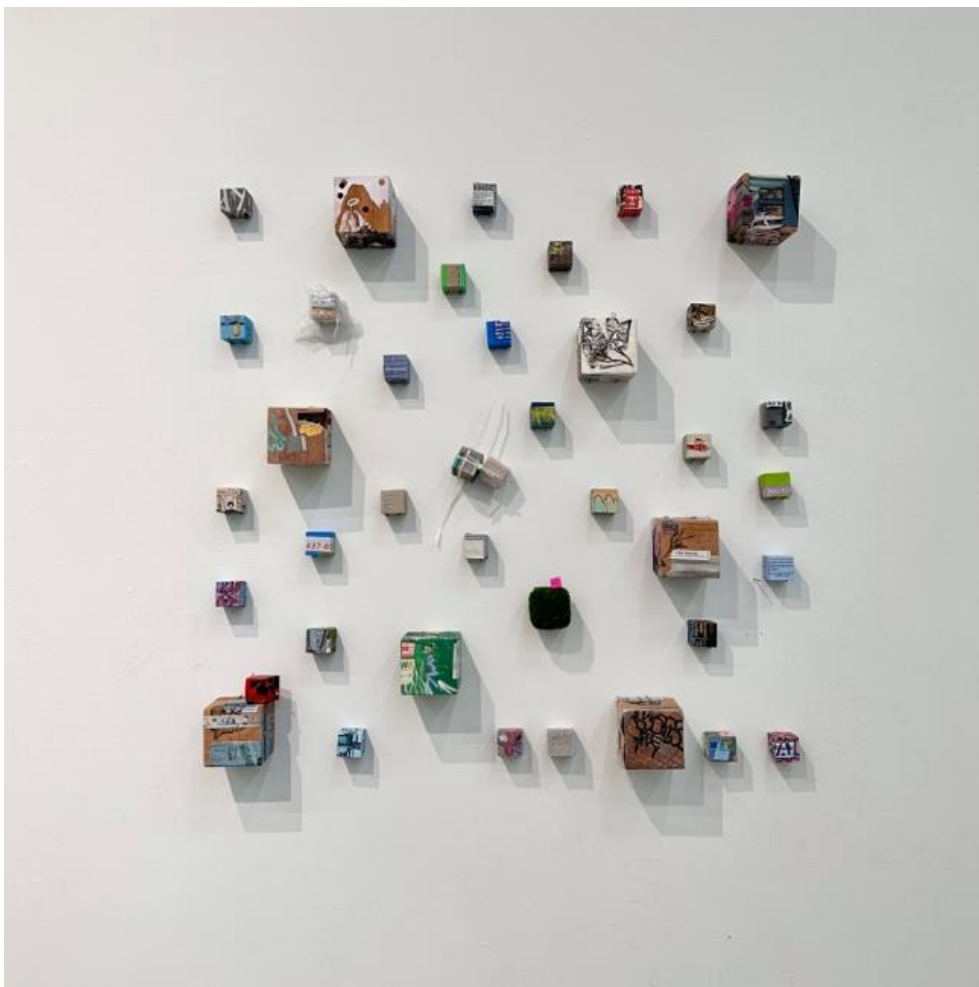


Figure 28 *Lady's Playground* (detail), 2023, Emily De Boer

In rejecting the wall and the plinth as presentation devices I have had to find alternatives for presenting the work. Found and manufactured objects have become plinths and structures for the work to rest, for example: pylons, signs, boxes, plywood boards or a bus bench backrest. These containers come with their own connotations as the objects themselves are charged with meaning. The bus *Bench* (fig. 33) in particular, typically housing advertisements for the real estate industry, is quite decontextualized when it is turned on its side, the ad within it flipped over and filled with altered, repeating collaged, prints that resemble stickers slapped onto the surface. The aesthetics and ethos of this practice rely heavily on graffiti. Intrinsically drawn to the autonomous and relentless pursuit of tagging one's way through a place, I instead relentlessly collect from the city with a similar aggression.



Figure 29 *Lady's Playground* (installation view), 2023, Emily De Boer



Figure 30 *Fenced in*, 2023, Emily De Boer



Figure 31 *Lonely City*, 2023, Emily De Boer

Collecting the ready-mades that become plinths (fig. 30 and fig. 31) and containers (fig. 32) for the work is heavily reliant on chance and the assistance of others. Drawn to objects that are charged with meaning, I enjoy the juxtaposition of those objects within the gallery as the foundation for my worlds. The desire to take objects from the city that debilitates my movement has come from a sense of spite. I have managed to attain objects that are literal barriers, flipping them upside down and building worlds on top of them, I am uprooting their authority and manipulating their purpose for my own.



## Printmaking (as propaganda)

I consider the influence of ideas, spread to a population, a sort of worldbuilding. Posters have historically been used to influence the public, to spread news and awareness to a community, now used as advertising, our public space has been coopted by corporations to

influence us. What surrounds us, influences us. Inserting my repeated, reimagined, everyday imagery back into the street I can break up the current capitalistic propaganda for my own: the expansion of Lady's Playground.



*Figure 32 Bench, 2023, Emily De Boer*

Because of my desire, and Lady's ability, to claim space through the spreading and accumulation of my work within space, I required another medium to help me achieve this claiming. Printmaking's laborious process, and my unwillingness to register the prints<sup>42</sup>, came from a desire to take up more space without having to give up the creation of each individual piece. I am drawn to processes that require diligent planning and preparation and

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<sup>42</sup> Robert Rauschenberg also constantly improvised in his screen-printing process, not registering his prints, never creating two works alike.



yet succumb to chance. The arduous labor that goes into creating something that appears simple and easy has always appealed to me. So much goes into the planning and adapting of navigation when you have a disability, it takes a lot of work to make it look easy.



*Figure 33 Screen prints wheat pasted on wall (Lady's Playground detail), 2024, Emily De Boer*

Lady is a reoccurring motif within the prints as a single breezeblock. Her repeated motif claiming each surface she travels to. This worldbuilding through a repeated character installed within a space resembles Fafi, a graffiti writer and her character Fafinette. Originally from Toulouse, France she grew up with an interest in the transformation of paintings to



architecture. Painting a sexy, character dressed in pink repeatedly throughout the city she noticed the world she was creating through her installations. Painting new characters for her world that is ever expanding, she is creating a universe people can insert themselves into, where they can see the joy in its construction<sup>43</sup>.

The use of repeated motifs to claim space is not a new idea. Graffiti writers write their name on everything as a way of claiming space and becoming seen. Printmaking allows me to use my cut-outs to create screen-printed collages that share repeated motifs while each being completely original. In putting these prints out in the real world, I am building an environment and installing it on the street.



## **Installation (as worldbuilding)**

These building materials once collected are used to build a world within the gallery. The various scales, mediums, and processes of installation I utilize require the viewer to consider different perspectives. My work, due to its small scale demands a close inspection of the work, demands they alter their body to the space, and consider their navigation. This strategic manipulation has become another place to play in my practice. My installations are installed by myself, most often, and reject traditional display heights. They are hung low on the walls, on the floor, composed in the center of the space, or on a structure not typically reserved for art installations. This is out of the same desire for independence and access that has inspired this practice. There are certain desires though that I cannot accomplish without help. With the need for help comes the lack of control, as accounting for chance has become a

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<sup>43</sup> Status Magazine ‘Daydream delight Fafi reveals her world of fafinettes and Fantasy’  
pg. 85 <https://issuu.com/statusmagonline/docs/status7>

crucial part in my practice, I have had to come to terms with this. To mitigate a lack of control, and achieve my desired composition, I plan extensively the development of my installation.

The impulse to manipulate space, take up space and demand people consider the space they are in is one Mona Hatoum and I share. Hatoum understands how hostile architectural environments can be for some bodies. I appreciate how her installations, as large interventions in space, aim to make people consider their body's relation to the space and the objects within it, similarly to my final installation (fig. 34). A Palestinian living in Lebanon, she is aware of that struggle with barriers, borders and negotiating access to places that should already account for her. She uses ready-mades and modified ready-mades to create sculptures and installations that inspire the same sense of unease she has experienced her entire life due to the occupation of Palestine. Her identity has been weaponized against her. I am interested in how she has used this understanding of access to create work that asks people to consider a different perspective, hers.

The ready-mades she uses have built-in connotations, she then directly juxtaposes them with her manipulation of the object or material. *Impenetrable*, 2009<sup>44</sup> perfectly illustrates this juxtaposition. It looks clean and stark, but upon closer inspection you see it's just the opposite, sharp, unsuspecting, and potentially dangerous if one were to attempt entry. With *Impenetrable* Hatoum has created a space where initially you are bombarded by the composition of the space, finding solace in the symmetry, the intense contrast of black metal floating in the white space, gently swaying from the movement of bodies. Large nine-foot-long metal strands hang in uniform rows from fishing line to form a floating cube in the center of the gallery space. Made up of 441 strands of barbed wire it is both delicate and threatening. The piece oscillates between these two often polarized characterizations,

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<sup>44</sup> See Mona Hatoum's *Impenetrable*, 2009 here: <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/30304>

destabilizing the environment. This cognitive dissonance makes viewers question the ground they walk on.

Inspired by Hatoum's work, I wish to make people consider how they are navigating space, I purposefully interrupt the viewers understanding of how they navigate the objects installed. By taking urban, street ready-mades and creating these composed barriers we are making those experiencing our work consider the space they are in and how to navigate it. The precarity of my blocks and the charged connotations of the ready-mades I use in my installations imply a similar harm. In building these worlds, I am asking the viewer to care for the space as they'd wish to be cared for. I am fascinated by how she is able to create such strong statements about access, refusal, and the harm of being somewhere that doesn't account for you. Access is precarious if you were meant to be denied, when the space was designed to exclude you. I create spaces where inclusion is built in, where access is inherent to each installed world.



### ***Lady's Playground, (a reconstructed, accessible world)***

The entirety of this program has been the development of this final installation. The plywood ready-mades, found through chance, have cut-outs and silkscreen prints wheat pasted onto each panel. They are then hung on the wall, changing their context from the street to the gallery. The cedar trees act as a soft barrier obscuring the entrance to the space. The silkscreen prints are posterized throughout the gallery space on tall columns that force viewers to consider how I have installed them (fig. 35). Throughout the development of my final thesis exhibition, I was asking how I could build a space within the gallery that forces the viewer to consider their navigation of the space. I began this process by asking how I would

respond to the gallery space. I knew that I wanted to build a place the viewer would have to negotiate their movements around, where wayfinding requires more consideration than typically necessary within the gallery.



*Figure 34 Lady's Playground (installation view), 2024*

Despite the gentle barrier the cedar trees present, the installed world is inherently accessible. Made that way through the collection of objects, the manipulation of them and the community that aided its installation. The collaboration intrinsic to this work has inspired a deeper investigation of chance. Specifically making me question how I can rely on it so significantly while maintaining my autonomy.

This thesis project brought together my many strategies of worldbuilding, using collage, printmaking, and ready-made objects, I constructed a reimagined world within the

gallery. Collaborating with my community through chance scenarios, I have reclaimed my city through the compulsive capture of decisive moments.



Figure 35 *Lady's Playground* (installation view), 2024, Emily De Boer



## Looking Forward

My research is deeply personal, coming from an embodied understanding of inaccessibility and the discrimination I face due to the way my body is perceived, it is profoundly vulnerable to discuss and present the ways in which I am not accounted for. What surprised me about this installation was the overwhelming outpouring of love I received after presenting my thesis and displaying *Lady's Playground*, 2024 (fig. 34 and fig. 35). Presenting



work that is so personal and finding that others not only appreciate the work but find their own solace in it has changed my life. I will continue to build spaces that call out and refuse discrimination. I will continue to build spaces where care and community are integral to their construction.

My research inquiries are now heavily invested in the notion of collaboration, what is reappropriate-able? What makes public space - and the motifs that adorn it - worthy of archiving and reimagining? What about these ephemeral moments and the cultural value they carry, makes these messages worthy of archiving, worthy of memorializing, worthy of reimagining? And finally, how can I continue my practice of worldbuilding outside of the gallery, reinserting my constructions into the streets they originated from?

What I make next will continue to balance chance and control. It will still be about the street, about the construction of accessible spaces, about the manipulation of my collected building materials. With the street as my source, I have an endless stream of inspiration at my disposal. Using a fixed lens camera, I will continue to explore street photography using the control of a 40mm lens and my seated perspective. Documenting my perspective of the street, I will expand my archive of the street and thus my content available for worldbuilding.

The development of this thesis project allowed me to explore mediums I had never before experimented with. My next project will incorporate the mediums I began experimenting with but never fully explored, linocut printmaking in particular. The creation of this large installation inspired a similar project that would allow me to build a house out of my collected materials. I will carve my cut-ups into lino, printing these onto shingle shaped paper that will then side the structure. I want to build a home for Lady, one where care and community are integral to the structure. Lady has made a home in the center of this playground I built for her (fig. 34).

I am looking forward to the evolution of my practice, it is a rapidly evolving, constantly adapting process of creativity. I am never without an idea, I will continue to collect, build, and cultivate a community that inspires this compulsive creativity as it is integral to who I am as an artist. I cannot stop moving, cannot stop making, and cannot stop responding to the world around me.



## Conclusion

My work is the claiming and construction of accessible, considerate spaces for all bodies. These constructed installations become crip-centric liberated zones as they recognize, validate, and heal the harm caused by exclusion. By collaging images and objects from the street together within the gallery, I am questioning the way architecture manipulates certain bodies. By creating installations that point to this manipulation, I am asking viewers to consider how their body is able to access my worlds.

My practice has evolved from the curation of composition to the curation of chance. My role as artist is to respond, respond to my observations, to the printed photograph, to the cut-outs, to the gallery. In curating a response, I am able to choose what is being represented, whose voices are being lifted, what messages are being spread, while calling attention to who is being excluded, who is being asked to consider their body, their biases. Neutrality is dangerous, I want people to question what their idea of neutral space feels like. I want the viewer to notice who is excluded in the spaces they experience daily. Just because hostile space is normalized does not mean that an alternative, accessible space is not possible.



Figure 36 *Lady's Playground (detail)*, 2024, Emily De Boer



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