

The Politics of (Self) Care

A Symposium on Disability Justice and Collective Action as Self-Care

Organized by Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst and the research group «Rethinking Art History through Disability» at the Institute of Art History, University of Zurich

Location

Caring Space,
Migros Museum für
Gegenwartskunst

Date

November 18, 2023
14:30–21:00

Registration

claudia.heim@mgb.ch

The symposium «The Politics of (Self) Care» takes place on the occasion of the exhibition *Interdependencies* at the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst. A great awareness in the politics of care has emerged against the backdrop of the global pandemic, but also in the wake of global protest movements that have drawn attention to structural forms of oppression in social systems and called for intersectional perspectives. The increasing recognition of disability and chronic illness in the arts has led to a long-overdue response to ableism in the art world and to the exploration of concepts of accessibility and disability justice. There is also cause for concern that these issues will quickly fade from the spotlight as the neoliberal machinery turns its attention to new topics once the pandemic becomes less of a priority for those privileged to ignore it.

While self-care is sometimes criticized as part of the capitalist wellness industry, disability justice thinkers remind us that it has a very different meaning from that perspective. The act of caring can thus become a critique of systems of domination and exploitation. The symposium points to the structural problems of health care in various societies that contribute more to the exclusion of those affected than to their inclusion. Similar effects also occur at the social level and in coexistence, as people can be excluded by ethical actions. In contrast, the symposium presents approaches that create connections between affected people, such as «care webs» that build their structures of care for themselves and their community. These are activist structures and communities that advocate for their rights. Based on these considerations, the symposium explores how established narratives can be addressed and rewritten through acts of care.

How can notions of collective and self-care coexist? How have they been instrumentalized for political purposes? How can we reframe the relationship between individuals and communities? What are the implications of thinking about bodies and embodied forms of knowledge? How can we acknowledge the contribution of actors systematically left out of normative narratives about care, from care work to more-than-human models of care? This symposium will address how social injustice and problems that exist in most of our societies can be made visible through art. It will explore the spaces, media, and practices used by contemporary artists to make us aware of the overlooked structures of interdependence that shape our lives.

ACCESSIBILITY

- Please let us know two weeks in advance if you need translation and/or sign language interpretation.
- The space is wheelchair accessible and there will be various seating options available throughout the event.
- Catering and adequate breaks will also be guaranteed.
- There are both gender-neutral and accessible toilets in the building.
- Further information on the museum's access can be found here: [Accessibility](#)
- For any questions and requirements, please contact Claudia Heim: Claudia.heim@mgb.ch / +41 58 570 10 62

Program

14:30

Registration

15:00

Welcome and introduction

Michael Birchall and Claudia Heim (Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst)
Virginia Marano, Charlotte Matter and Laura Valterio (Research group «Rethinking Art History through Disability» at the Institute of Art History, University of Zurich)

15:15 – 16:00

Alice Hattrick [online], «Our Fallow State»

Alice will read from their essay on crip time, sewing and care ecologies, commissioned by Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst for the exhibition Interdependencies.

break of 15 min.

16:15 – 17:00

Cat Dawson [in person] and Mae Howard [online], «F/Ailing Forms: Re-Visioning Trans and Disabled Bodies beyond the Medical Industrial Complex»

As the academic fields of disability studies, trans studies, and queer/feminist science and technology studies have coalesced over recent decades, a number of artists have developed practices that activate intersections of disability, desire, and care in ways that refuse extant binary logics of illness vs health, disability and desire, and all that follows on. Those working in this space have attended with particular frequency to the resonances and opacities among non-normative forms of embodiment that exceed, but never lose sight of, how the medicalization of non-normative bodies has perpetuated the marginalization of those bodies. This talk explores how a number of artists working transversely across pain and pleasure, crip bodies and care work — including Bob Flanagan, Gregg Bordowitz, Mae Howard — challenge knowledge formations both within and adjacent to the field of medicine that continue to regulate trans, disabled, and desiring bodies.

break of 15 min.

17:15 – 18:30

*Sarah Browne [in person] and Elaine Lillian Joseph [in person], «Inside / Outside Joke»
Screening of Buttercup (work in progress, ca. 26 min.), followed by a conversation*

Buttercup is a film essay that focuses on one particular photograph of the artist as a child, where she is pictured on her father's farm with her pet cow. A series of fixed-frame, barely-moving images are used in the film to narrate resonances and discordances that emerge through the photograph — between human and bovine domestication, desire, disability and wildness. The Narrator character in the film, She, follows these enquiries while also providing the functional audio description as part of the embedded soundtrack. Buttercup is made in close collaboration with audio describer Elaine Lillian Joseph and composer David Donohoe, and in consultation with a forum of blind and visually-impaired users. In the conversation following the work-in-progress screening, artist Sarah Browne and audio describer Elaine Lillian Joseph discuss this multi-layered collaboration, on Buttercup and a previous project with autistic young people titled Echo's Bones (Dublin, 2022). In particular they are interested in the effect of foregrounding the accessibility tool of audio description as an artistic concern. Using the framework of an inside / outside joke, they will discuss how methodologies of «access» can more deeply draw out conceptual and ethical questions for artist and community: of description and self-description; «knowing», translation and situatedness.

Program

18:30 – 19:45

Apero break

19:45 – 20:30

Johanna Hedva [online], «Can I Hit You?»

«Can I Hit You?» is an erotic love letter to consensual violence as a method of healing, community-building, repair, and joy. The piece moves through considerations of different kinds of intimacies and interdependencies that are enacted while consensually inflicting and receiving pain, whether in combat sports (MMA, boxing, Lucha Libre, pro wrestling), or BDSM, kink, and queer social spaces. Nonconsensual violence is always present, but here Hedva grapples with the legacy of violence acted out by the women in their family, from their Korean grandmother to their mother, and, without minimizing the harm and abuse this caused, manages to find admiration and space for how fierce, how extreme, these women could be, and most importantly, why. Instead of the controlling utopia of the safe space, Hedva calls for us to learn how to do pain together, rejecting notions of social safety, security, and harmony that do not acknowledge the fact that often care must be necessitated by damage, which means pain must always be included in how we understand care. Looking closely at the gendered implications of violence, the essay is enlivened by characters such as The Goblin, whom Hedva encounters in a vivid BDSM scene, as well as a very tall and muscular switch who likes to be punched. Moving through scenes that vibrantly illustrate the homoerotics of professional wrestling (which Hedva calls «masculinity drag») and the queer desire at a sex rave in Mexico City, Hedva considers the camaraderie and connection that can be sparked in socialities that are constructed around pain, asking us to imagine a new world that does not suppress or erase the aggression and violence that can be the grounds for pleasure, discovery, and liberation.

Speakers

Sarah Browne is an artist concerned with spoken and unspoken, bodily experiences of knowledge, labour and justice. Her practice involves sculpture, film, performance and public projects, and frequent interdisciplinary collaboration. Browne's recent solo projects include *Echo's Bones* (2022: collaborative filmmaking project with autistic young people, responding to works by Samuel Beckett, commissioned by Fingal County Council) and *Public Feeling* (2019: public art commission in South Dublin leisure centres). Solo exhibitions include *Report to an Academy*, Marabouparken, Stockholm (2017), *Hand to Mouth* at CCA Derry~Londonderry & Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, and *The Invisible Limb*, basis, Frankfurt (both 2014). In 2020 she curated TULCA Festival of Visual Arts, Galway, with a project titled *The Law is a White Dog*. Significant group exhibitions Browne has participated in include *Bergen Assembly: Actually, the Dead are Not Dead* (2019) and the *Liverpool Biennial*, with Jesse Jones (2016). She is associate artist with University College Dublin College of Social Sciences and Law.

Cat Dawson is a scholar and critic who works at the intersection of feminist, queer, and trans studies, and the History of Art, and studies the cultural production of minoritized subjects in the global twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Their first book, *Monumental: Race, Representation, Culture* is forthcoming from MIT Press. Their second book, *Trans Form: Imaging Trans Bodies in Science and Society* has been solicited from MIT Press for their new series *On Seeing*. They received their PhD in Visual Studies from the University at Buffalo in 2018 and are currently Guest Faculty in Art History at Sarah Lawrence College.

Alice Hattrick is a writer and lecturer based in London, UK. They are the author of the non-fiction book *Ill Feelings*, exploring illness, intimacy and family ties, published by Fitzcarraldo Editions and Feminist Press.

Johanna Hedva (they/them) is a Korean American writer, artist, and musician, who was raised in Los Angeles by a family of witches, and now lives in LA and Berlin. Hedva is the author of the novels *Your Love Is Not Good* and *On Hell*, and *Minerva the Miscarriage of the Brain*, a collection of poems, performances, and essays. Their albums are *Black Moon Lilith in Pisces in the 4th House* and *The Sun and the Moon*. Their work has been shown in Berlin at Gropius Bau, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, and Institute of Cultural Inquiry; The Institute of Contemporary Arts in London; Performance Space New York; Gyeongnam Art Museum in South Korea; the 14th Shanghai Biennial, the LA Architecture and Design Museum; the Museum of Contemporary Art on the Moon; and in the Transmediale, Unsound, and Rewire Festivals. Their writing has appeared in *Triple Canopy*, *frieze*, *The White Review*, *Topical Cream*, *Spike*, and is anthologized in *Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art*. Their essay «Sick Woman Theory,» published in 2016, has been translated into 11 languages.

Mae Howard is a visual artist and ritualist whose interdisciplinary approach extends across research-based, participatory, and collaborative projects ranging from lens-based media, sculpture, installation, and performance. Calling upon lineages of disabled/trans care work, Mae is interested in the embodied, fleshly, and material enmeshment of BDSM, the medical industrial complex, biopolitics, and disability. Their work explores the residue of discard, debilitation, and excess. Mae has performed for Julie Tolentino, Z Tye Richardson, and Wardell Milan. Their work has been exhibited in New York, Berlin, Mexico City, and Philadelphia. They are currently a 2023–2024 fellow at the Whitney Independent Study Program.

Elaine Lillian Joseph is an audio describer based in London and Birmingham. She is a founding member of *Sound-Scribe*, a global majority collective of audio describers and consultants specialising in access for performance work, arts institutions and moving image. She offers an embodied and creative approach that resists the pressure to create de-personalised audio descriptions, re-centering marginalised voices through consultations with blind and visually impaired audiences. The question that galvanises her practice is how can we honour the labour of access work and create a service that powerfully resonates with users? A selection of recently completed projects include *Eve Stainton's Impact Driver* at the Institute for Contemporary Arts in London, an online screening of *Hofesh Shechter's Political Mother*, a newly commissioned audio described track for *Black Audio Film Collective's Handsworth Songs* and a series of videos for *Gucci Equilibrium*.