

Crip Materiality: The Art Institution after the Americans with Disabilities Act

By

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Dissertation Abstract

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Crip Materiality: The Art Institution after the Americans with Disabilities Act seeks to transform the field of crip art history and visual culture by forwarding a new methodological approach, what I am calling *crip materiality*. As I diagram in my published work and conference papers, there are currently three main methodological approaches in the study of crip art history and visual culture: (1) biography (e.g., was the artist disabled?); (2) subject matter (e.g., is disability represented and, if so, how?); and (3) style (e.g., does the mode of representation convey disability?). *Crip Materiality*, however, extends this questioning of why disability is not visible or valued in the art institution and art history to address how ableism affects the understanding and valuation of the very fibers of art materials and fabrication. By focusing on the treatment of the material condition of art objects and the buildings that house and display them, we can attend to the unperceived ways in which ableism informs how we treat what is understood to be physically deteriorating, or what in museum terminology is called *inherent vice* (a term that on its face asserts a moral judgment regarding an art object's physical ability). This critical reappraisal of the intersection of disability and art to include the material conditions of art, specifically those deemed beyond repair, is key to creating inclusivity in the art institution and in the academic discourse regarding what I will describe in this dissertation as "mad objects" and "weak art." The question of how to think with, care for, and center unintentionally deteriorating art objects as valuable in their own right as opposed to expendable or "dead" is the purpose of *crip materiality*.

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Support after the ADA. Between 2013 – 2016, I was one of the founding members and lead organizers for the Borghesi-Mellon workshop *Disability Studies/ Disability Activism* sponsored through UW-Madison's Center for the Humanities. *Disability Studies/ Disability Activism* organized and hosted over twenty public lectures and workshops intended for the broader Madison, WI community and for university students, faculty, and staff with the specific goal to create a bridge between the university and the community to cultivate a lasting network of scholars and community members. In 2016, with the generous help of the UW-Madison Anonymous Fund, I organized a public, two-day symposium titled *Disability Aesthetics: Reframing Disability in Artistic, Curatorial, Material, and Visual Practice* featuring visiting scholars Ann Fox, Katherine Ott, and the work of Tobin Siebers (who passed away during the symposium).

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Introduction: Crip Materiality

The year 2020 marked the 30th anniversary of the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), civil rights legislation that seeks to protect the rights of people with disabilities in employment, public transportation, and public accommodations. The ADA brought disability into broad public view by mandating reasonable accommodations that produced dramatic changes to the built environment. From elevators and ramps to wheelchair accessible bathrooms, access has become part of the everyday landscape, including the art institution. Since the passage of the ADA, the range of accommodations has expanded from considerations of physical access to art institutions and their collections to understanding access as a moral barometer by which art institutions leverage their cultural relevance. As Director of the Museum of Modern Art Glenn Lowry articulates in a two-minute video titled “Our Commitment to Accessibility,” “Accessibility is essential to the visitor experience ... that means addressing the needs of everybody that comes to the museum.”¹ Yet, every-body is not the same. This point is made painfully clear by the video’s lack of closed captioning, American Sign Language, audio description, or any form of access that would make this “commitment to accessibility” little more than a façade behind which most art institutions (MoMA included) have done very little to create space where diverse bodyminds are not merely included but radically welcome.² To paraphrase Fred Moten, the art institution is no longer a place necessarily marked by exclusion, but a place where inclusion of what counts as diversity becomes an extractive industry to mine the talents of

¹ *Our Commitment to Accessibility*, n.d., <https://www.moma.org/multimedia/video/97/1602>.

² I use “bodymind” because, as Margaret Price writes, “...mental and physical processes not only affect each other but also give rise to each other—that is, because they tend to act as one, even though they are conventionally understood as two—it makes more sense to refer to them together, in a single term.” Margaret Price, “The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain,” ed. Kim Q. Hall, *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 269.

those “diverse” subjects and then disregard any deeper commitment to hold those same lives with the esteem that would foster structural changes to create radical welcome, or honor and foreground that diversity.³ Some argue for abandoning the art institution altogether. I argue that because the art institution is more than any one singular site, but is instead a cultural complex tethered to colonial, white, ableist, sexist, and often nationalistic structures that extend to all sectors of society including secondary education, public funding, as well as dubious private funding, there is no outside to the institution for one to escape. The institution will always find you and incorporate you, whether you think you are outside it or not. The new methodology forwarded in this dissertation, what I am calling *crip materiality*, is a tactic and a methodology to reckon with the ableist foundation of the institution at a material and molecular level in order to hold the institution accountable to its promises of inclusion instead of their mimicry of the extractive economies of colonial capitalism.

“Ableism” is a concept and prejudicial ideology that I critique at length in this project, and in all my projects. While it is a concept known and understood in many academic and activist circles, it is still a term that has not risen to a level of broad understanding and deserves explanation before proceeding further. Put simply, ableism is the belief that disability is inferior.

³ Quote from Fred Moten: “We live in a different historical moment now because the exclusionary structures of the institutions that we all fought against 20 years ago, now what we’re fighting against is their constant extractive, incorporative modalities. It’s not that they are no longer exclusionary, it’s that their practices of exclusion are extraction and incorporation. And, even that’s not new, but it’s an update of old technologies. So, when we fight against the institution and when we try to understand and know something about how the institution operates, we’re still fighting against its old models of exclusion even though now it operates by way of new models of extraction and incorporation. And we’re trying to get into some shit that we should be trying to get the fuck up out of.” Fred Moten, “Strike MoMA Working Group of IIAAF Presents: A Conversation with Sandy Grande, Stefano Harney, Fred Moten, Jasbir Puar, and Dylan Rodriguez” (www.strikemoma.org, May 27, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2vzhwnjy4s>.

I personally prefer Talila A. Lewis' "working definition" of *ableism* because it is both intersectional and inclusive:

A system that places value on people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normality, intelligence, excellence, desirability, and productivity. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in anti-Blackness, eugenics, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism and capitalism. This form of systemic oppression leads to people and society determining who is valuable and worthy based on a person's language, appearance, religion and/or their ability to satisfactorily [re]produce, excel and 'behave.' You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism.⁴

Lewis' definition makes many important moves that are critical to fully understanding the danger and the pervasiveness of ableism. First, by calling it a "working definition," Lewis foregrounds that ableism is never a fixed set of injustices, but that it is shifty and shifting, insidiously showing up in new ways and thus requiring new tactics for dismantling it. Second, Lewis clearly states that ableism is inherently intersectional, which is to say that discussing disability is always already a conversation about race, gender, sexuality, and class. Lastly, Lewis makes the often-overlooked point that one does "not have to be disabled to experience ableism." This is an essential point that emphasizes how race, gender, nationality, and/or class can mark one as disabled without in fact being disabled and thus suffer ableist devaluation and discrimination as a result. This point also makes room for more fluid definitions and understandings of disability. Which is to say that "being disabled" can be a flexible state where on some days your bodymind is different than on other days and that your status as disabled shifts between time and geographic locations.

Crip Materiality confronts ableism in a specific time and place – in the United States after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. Yet, I've selected artists and

⁴ Talila A. Lewis, "Ableism," *Talila A. Lewis* (blog), January 2021, <https://www.talilalewis.com/blog>.

objects (both sculptural and architectural objects) that were created before 1990. My first chapter, “Mad Objects: Claes Oldenburg’s *Soft Screw*,” focuses on the deterioration of Claes Oldenburg’s 1975, polyurethane sculpture, *Soft Screw* (Fig. 1). The second chapter, “Weak Art: The Care of Eva Hesse,” examines the discourse and conservation around Hesse’s 1969 sculpture *Expanded Expansion* (Fig. 2). And, chapter three, “Aspirational Access (at The Barnes Foundation): Dreaming Spaces of Belonging,” focuses on the installation of an elevator in the mid-1990s in the Barnes Foundation gallery, a building that was originally constructed in 1925 (Fig. 3). So, why then position this project “after the Americans with Disability Act”? Because this project is not primarily about the lives of Claes Oldenburg, Eva Hesse, or Albert Barnes; nor is it ultimately about the social and cultural times that these sculptures or architectural structures were originally created. I have positioned this project after the Americans with Disability Act because I investigate the ways in which ableism functions after this landmark legislation that was intended to create a more inclusive and equitable world for disabled people. I attend to how those legal mandates, while important, fundamentally failed to change the discourse around disability, specifically in the art institution and thus why we need new methods and tactics to hold the institution accountable to its promise of inclusion. *Crip Materiality* also questions the hegemony of the original form over all other new, changing, and specifically deteriorating and decaying forms. While the case studies all encompass flashpoints in American Modernism, this is not a history of American Modernism. Instead, this is a history and theorization of something new: a crip art history, a crip materiality. To say this another way, Claes Oldenburg is not my subject. The circumstances of *Soft Screw*’s deterioration and the how it lost its art object status is the subject. The way that Eva Hesse fits into the larger trajectory of post-Minimalist art history is not my subject. The ableist discourse surrounding Hesse’s brain tumor and the conservation of the

work she created post-tumor is my subject. The specific works collected by Barnes and his innovative “ensembles” is not my subject. The circumstances that led to the installation of an elevator and the aspirational access that resulted is my subject.

This dissertation is also located after the ADA because of the ways in which art institutions do or do not incorporate the legal mandates of access and especially the ways in which they do or do not make strides to do more than the legally mandated minimum. While some art institutions, especially those built after the passage of the ADA, seek to accommodate patrons with disabilities, these accommodations come in the form of an additive model designed for physical and sensory disabilities through ramps, elevators, the occasional “touch tour for the blind”, and, as Lowry demonstrated, an empty rhetoric of universal inclusion. What is left unaddressed are not only the access needs of the mentally ill and neurodiverse, but also the deep structural ableism that prevents the creation of inclusive and radical welcome that are not just material but also discursive in nature, existing outside the legal parameters of the ADA, and often understood as excessive, unreasonable, and a hardship.⁵ However, the decisions we make to design inclusive spaces, to honor diversity, and to create radical welcome matter at every level and not just at the point of entry. I build on what Mia Mingus calls “access intimacy” that requires the kind of thinking in advance that anticipates needs, which is the foundation of real welcome.⁶ This foundational instead of additive approach represents a reorientation of practice

⁵ I use the word “unreasonable” and “hardship” with intention here to signal the ADA’s vague wording that creates loopholes for ADA noncompliance where “reasonable” accommodations do not have to be implemented if it creates an undue hardship: “The term ‘undue hardship’ means an action requiring significant difficulty or expense, when considered in light of the factors set forth in subparagraph B.” Sen. Harkin, Tom [D-IA], “Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990,” Pub. L. No. Public Law No: 101-336., § 12111. Definitions, (9) Reasonable accommodation, (10) Undue hardship (1990).

⁶ “Access intimacy is that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else “gets” your access needs. The kind of eerie comfort that your disabled self feels with someone on a purely access

toward always doing more than the legally mandated minimum. Creating spaces of inclusion that honor diversity requires a holistic approach that, rather than investing in permanence (which often translates to a preservation of exclusionary structures), must remain open to the work of substantial change by anticipating and centering not just those already inside the art institution, but also to those yet to come. This dissertation demonstrates that a key cornerstone of the structural ableism of the art institution is the way some art objects under the stewardship of the institution, specifically objects that due to age or material condition share the vulnerabilities of disability, are treated as disposable, unwanted, ugly, or in need of a cure, treatments that mimic ableist cultural and medical responses to disability itself.

To address this structural and discursive ableism and to bring crip theory, art history, and museum studies into a novel and critical conversation, I have developed this new methodology. Traditionally, there are three methodological approaches to the study of disability in art history: biography (e.g., was the artist disabled?); subject matter (e.g., is disability represented and, if so, how?); and style (e.g., does the mode of representation convey disability?).⁷ In contrast, crip materiality extends these questions regarding the representation of disability in the art institution to consider how ableism affects our understanding and valuation of the very fibers of art

level... Access intimacy is not just the action of access or “helping” someone. We have all experienced access that has left us feeling like a burden, violated or just plain shitty. Many of us have experienced obligatory access where there is no intimacy, just a stoic counting down of the seconds until it is over. This is not access intimacy.” Mia Mingus, “Access Intimacy: The Missing Link,” *Leaving Evidence* (blog), May 5, 2011, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/>.

⁷ Jessica A. Cooley, “Crip Materiality: Inherent Vice, Disability, and The Art of Failure,” in *Reorientations: New Conceptual Directions in Disability Studies* (getting it-right/s, the 28th Annual Meeting of the Society for Disability Studies, Atlanta, GA, 2015); Jessica A. Cooley, “A Loose Screw: Madness, Inherent Vice, and the Unraveling of Crip Materiality” (Disability as Spectacle, UCLA, 2017); Jessica A. Cooley, “Fine Arts,” in *Disability in American Life: An Encyclopedia of Concepts, Policies, and Controversies*, ed. Tamar Heller et al., vol. 1, 2 vols. (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, an imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2019), 285–87.

materials, their fabrication, curation, and conservation. By focusing on the treatment of the material condition of art objects and the buildings in which they are housed and displayed, crip materiality calls attention to how we treat what is understood to be physically deteriorating. Specifically, crip materiality focuses on art objects that are defined in museum terminology as having “inherent vice,” art that is unintentionally falling apart because it is composed of one or more materials known to degrade, corrode, or cause the object to disintegrate in a way that cannot be stopped or prevented by conservation science.

Crip materiality follows in the wake of Tobin Siebers’ field-altering *Disability Aesthetics* that mined disability’s unremarked centrality to art history and visual culture studies, their methods, and systems of valuation. With its crucial turn to conceive disability as not merely a matter of representation, biography, or biology but also as a style and aesthetic, Siebers’ *Disability Aesthetics* exposed the previously unacknowledged and yet pivotal role of disability: “disability is properly speaking an aesthetic value, which is to say, it participates in a system of knowledge that provides materials for and increases critical consciousness about the way that some bodies make other bodies feel.”⁸

I extend the challenge of Siebers’ critical prompt by drawing on key aspects of the work in *crip theory* pioneered by, among others, Carrie Sandahl, Eli Clare, Robert McRuer, and Alison Kafer.⁹ Here, “crip” is articulated as an analytic mode that broadens the critical relevance of

⁸ Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 20.

⁹ Carrie Sandahl, “Queering the Crip or Crippling the Queer? Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance,” ed. Robert McRuer and Abby L Wilkerson, *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Desiring Disability: Queer Theory Meets Disability Studies, 9, Numbers 1-2 (2003); Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, Cultural Front (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington (Ind.): Indiana University Press, 2013); Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

disability studies' inquiry beyond the limiting frame of what is or is not traditionally defined as the proper subject of disability. The foundation of crip theory has intentional ties to queer theory as both reclaim words of injury to politicize and decenter the legal and medical spheres' sterile and pathological labels of "homosexual" and "disabled." "Crip" is a term that has enough historical flexibility and distance from today's medical terminology to function less as a fixed location in the body, or a specific time and place in history, and more as a broad political concept and critical practice. Or, as Eli Clare proposed in 1999: "*Queer* and *cripple* are cousins: words to shock, words to infuse with pride and self-love, words to resist internalized hatred, words to help forge a politics."¹⁰

Crip materiality draws on the foundational work of crip theory to trouble the expectation that the intersection of disability studies and art revolves solely around the biography and biology of an artist or the portrayal of a recognizable disabled subject. In this, crip materiality makes a crucial turn to conceive disability as material non-compliance at a molecular level in art objects and institutions.¹¹ My project's critical reappraisal of the intersection of disability and art to include the material conditions of art, specifically objects of inherent vice, is key to creating a more inclusive and participatory environment for disabled and non-disabled museum visitors and for the art they experience. My theorizing of disability as material non-compliance at a molecular level is most starkly condensed in the concept of inherent vice, a term that attributes a moral judgement of "vice" that is innate or "inherent" to deteriorating art. The American Institute for Conservation defines inherent vice as a class of art objects that unintentionally deteriorate due to

¹⁰ Clare, *Exile and Pride*, 84.

¹¹ My use of "non-compliance" in terms of disability was inspired by the following keynote address: Karen Nakamura, "The Spectacle of Disability (Studies) in the Age of Trump," in *Keynote (Disability as Spectacle, UCLA, 2017)*.

“intrinsic internal characteristics, including weak construction, poor quality or unstable materials.”¹² The words of the term itself – inherent vice – code material fragility as moral failure; a form of self-directed transgression. Objects of inherent vice are objects behaving badly. Or, to extend Karen Nakamura’s theory that “disability is a non-compliant way of being in the world,” the non-compliance of objects of inherent vice mark them as disabled.¹³ Understanding objects coded by ableist conservation discourse as objects of inherent vice as disabled illuminates how this foundational aspect of the art institution reinforces, however unwittingly, the ableist construction of disability as not just material deterioration but also as the object’s own fault rather than systemic failures of support, understanding, or care. Thus, physical weakness becomes moral failure which must be either corrected or excluded.

The unintentional material instability of these noncompliant, disability art objects has become a growing point of contention for art institutions and conservators who argue over extensive measures taken to restore or replicate the ostensibly original state of deteriorating art objects.¹⁴ Deaccessioning objects of inherent vice is the other common route when art institutions do not have the time or money for conservation, or because these works pose a threat

¹² American Institute for Conservation, The Lexicon project, “Inherent Vice” (American Institute for Conservation, n.d.), https://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/Main_Page.

¹³ Nakamura, “The Spectacle of Disability (Studies) in the Age of Trump.”

¹⁴ Miguel Angel Corzo and Getty Conservation Institute, eds., *Mortality Immortality?: The Legacy of 20th-Century Art* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 1999); Tate Modern, “Inherent Vice: The Replica and Its Implications in Modern Sculpture Workshop,” 2007, <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/08>; Oscar Chiantore and Antonio Rava, *Conserving Contemporary Art: Issues, Methods, Materials, and Research* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2012); Iwona Szmelter, ed., *Innovative Approaches to the Complex Care of Contemporary Art*, The Knowledge Tree (London: Archetype, 2012); Lydia Beerkens et al., eds., *The Artist Interview: For Conservation and Presentation of Contemporary Art, Guidelines and Practice* (Heyningen: Jap Sam Books, 2012); IJstrand M. C. Hummelen and Dionne Sillé, eds., *Modern Art: Who Cares? An Interdisciplinary Research Project and an International Symposium on the Conservation of Modern and Contemporary Art* (London: Archetype, 2005).

to the overall “health” of their collection and the value of the artist’s estate.¹⁵ If the material instability is uncovered before accession, many art institutions will not collect or display these works because their material condition prevents them from attaining the classification of “museum quality.” Conservators and museum professionals directly and indirectly classify objects of inherent vice as “unhealthy,” which is exemplified by the Smithsonian’s Museum Conservation Institute’s initiative “*Healthy Environments, Healthy Practices, Healthy Collections*” as well as their project titled “Deterioration of modern materials - finding the cause, finding the cure.”¹⁶ This discourse frequently codes objects of inherent vice as disabled by enshrining the museum professional as doctor or surgeon and the object as ailing patient. I contend that the art institution’s correlation of inherent vice and health perpetuates the insidious spread of root metaphors that equate art with fitness and, by extension, disability with a eugenic desire for extinction through cure.

Inherent Vice: A History of Destructive Institutional Practices

The ableism attendant in the use and meaning of “inherent vice” in art institutions is also imbricated with racism and colonialism. Before museum professionals adopted the term “inherent vice” to describe deteriorating art objects, it was, and still is, a term belonging to maritime insurance law. Dating back to ancient Greek and Roman sea trade, “inherent vice” is an exclusionary clause absolving the insurer of any liability for goods that fail, rot, fall apart, or

¹⁵ Smithsonian Institute, “Smithsonian Museum Conservation Institute - About,” accessed March 16, 2017, https://www.si.edu/mci/english/about_mci/.
https://www.si.edu/mci/english/research/technical_studies/ModernMaterialDeterioration.html

¹⁶ Smithsonian Institute.

otherwise self-destruct due to their internal or natural instability.¹⁷ If, for example, during the course of sea transportation fruit rotted, wood mildewed, or meat spoiled without external factors such as poor packing, piracy, fire, or generally what is referred to as “perils of the sea,” but instead because of the inherent nature, or vice, of the material itself, then the loss could not be claimed; the insurer was not liable.¹⁸ The application of inherent vice extended to all commercial goods and property, including enslaved human beings claimed as property. During the transatlantic slave trade, inherent vice was a legal lynchpin when assessing the liability for enslaved persons lost at sea.¹⁹ According to the construction of inherent vice, once on board the ship, the enslaved person could be considered, depending on the circumstances, an “uninsurable commodity.” The violent and destructive rhetoric encapsulated in “inherent vice” is a horrifying reminder that the imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal death machine that allowed “inherent vice” to so casually show up in the legal texts and case histories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is the same imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal death machine that allows “inherent vice” to so casually show up in the art institution as art conservation and curatorial discourse.

¹⁷ Francis D. Rose, *Marine Insurance: Law and Practice*, 2nd ed (London: LLP, 2012), 382; Anita Rupprecht, “‘Inherent Vice’: Marine Insurance, Slave Ship Rebellion and the Law,” *Race & Class* 57, no. 3 (January 2016): 35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396815611849>.

¹⁸ Inherent Vice “means the risk of deterioration of the goods shipped as a result of their natural behaviour in the ordinary course of the contemplated voyage without the intervention of any fortuitous external accident or casualty.” Howard N. Bennett, *The Law of Marine Insurance*, 2nd ed (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 471.

¹⁹ See *McCargo v. The New Orleans Insurance Company* regarding the case of the slave ship Creole, Merritt M. Robinson, *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of Louisiana*, vol. X. From 1 March, to 20 June, 1845 (New Orleans: Published for the Reporter, by Samuel M. Stewart, Law Bookseller and Stationer, 1845); See the case of the slave ship Zong, JP Van Niekerk, “Fragments from the History of Insurance Law,” *South African Mercantile Law Journal* 13 (2001): 117; See the case of the slave ship Recovery, Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), chap. “The Dead Book”; See the case of the slave ship Creole, Rupprecht, “Inherent Vice.”

A legal text from 1781 defines “inherent vice” with a sinister indifference to the horrific number of enslaved people who took their own lives during the Transatlantic voyage:

The insurer takes upon him the risks of the loss, capture, and death of slaves, or any other unavoidable accident to them: but natural death is always understood to be excepted: - by natural death is meant, not only *when it happens by disease or sickness, but also when the captive destroys himself through despair*, which often happens: but when slaves are killed, or thrown into the sea in order to quell an insurrection on their part, then the insurers must answer. [Italics added by author for emphasis]²⁰

The inherent vice of enslaved people was thus understood as a propensity for disease and suicide: “the revolt or despair of negroes, resulting from the vice of character of the thing, ought in general to be at the risk of the insured.”²¹ The court cases that ensued often revolved around whether enslaved people were lost to the “perils of the sea,” making the insurance companies liable, or whether enslaved people died as a result of their “inherent vice” to “destroy himself through despair” and thus absolving the insurance companies of liability.²²

This non-compliance on the part of enslaved people was understood to be the manifestation of their inherent nature of mental instability. It was a judgment, that as Anita Rupprecht argues, underscores the long history entangling race and disability, specifically mental illness or madness.²³ Black, Indigenous, and people of color have been, and continue to be, subjugated and marginalized by the racist and ableist belief that there is a correlation between

²⁰ John Weskett, *A Complete Digest of the Theory, Laws and Practice of Insurance* (London: London : Richardson & Urquhart, 1781), 525. Originally cited in Rupprecht, “Inherent Vice,” 35. Because the original text was written in Old English, I changed letters (primarily the “f” to “s”) to reflect current English spelling.

²¹ Robinson, *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of Louisiana*, X. From 1 March, to 20 June, 1845: 337.

²² Robinson, *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of Louisiana*.

²³ Rupprecht, “Inherent Vice,” 36.

race and cognitive ability and/or stability.²⁴ The history of suicide by enslaved people is profound in its complexity and has been understood, as historian Michael A. Gomez writes, as “perhaps the ultimate form of resistance, as it contained within it the seed for regeneration and renewal.”²⁵ Suicide was retold by the enslaved and their descendants as stories of flight that translated into “Flying African” folklore where by leaping into the ocean from the slave ship, walking into the ocean once on American soil to drown, or refusing to eat or move until death by starvation or by murder by the enslavers’ hands, the enslaved person would, through death, be able to fly home to Africa. Gomez writes:

...the belief was very strong within the African-based community that at death one returned to the land of one's birth. Thus, flying via suicide was a sure way, perhaps the only way, to get back, at which point one could be reincarnated and live in the land of family and relations, far away from the experience called America.²⁶

Enslavers, insurance companies, and courts of law, however, interpreted these suicides as the result of an inherent vice, which was seen as a symptom of what, at the time, was understood as a form of mental illness, “medical nostalgia.”²⁷

The association between “inherent vice” as it is used by museum professionals and its antecedent in maritime insurance law is a connection that I made while researching the broader history of the term. To my knowledge, there is no discussion, research, or scholarship that explains or justifies this transference of terms. I can only speculate as to why art conservators

²⁴ Nirmala Erevelles and Andrea Minear, “Unspeakable Offenses: Untangling Race and Disability in Discourses of Intersectionality,” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 4, no. 2 (January 2010): 127–45, doi:10.3828/jlcmds.2010.11; Dea H Boster, *African American Slavery and Disability Bodies, Property, and Power in the Antebellum South, 1800-1860* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

²⁵ Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identity in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 120.

²⁶ Gomez, 120.

²⁷ Terri L. Snyder, “Suicide, Slavery, and Memory in North America,” *The Journal of American History* 97, no. 1 (June 2010): 51.

and museum authorities would adopt “inherent vice” for their professional use. It is possible that in creating insurance policies to safeguard art collections, the term was adopted to generally describe this category of art that was falling apart because of its internal or inherent instability. However, within the art institution, “inherent vice” is not a clause for liability exclusion, nor is it used for legal or insurance purposes. Instead, inherent vice is a descriptive term used in art conservation records and curatorial files as a categorical appraisal or judgement regarding the physical or material behavior of the art object. My research, so far, does not explain why “inherent vice,” the term used to categorize suicidal, unruly, and/or disabled enslaved people was transported to art conservation to describe art that is unintentionally falling apart. The connection between the application of “inherent vice” during the transatlantic slave trade and its current application in the art institution points out the ways that destructive institutional practices work in and across multiple layers of marginalized forms where discourses of ability, race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and religion are always intersecting. Although, if we consider that the beginnings of the art museum as institution is historically co-extensive with the transatlantic slave trade, in addition to considering a capitalist framework where the art museum is always part of the art market, then it is not a stretch to know that the art institution is as much part of the terrible alchemy that turns persons into things as is evident in the commercial art gallery and auction house.

The use of “inherent vice” in art institutions reproduces the ableist standards of fitness, pointing to the ways in which conservationist discourse is founded on and reproduces an understanding of disability as a condition in need of a cure. In this discourse, the art object is positioned as a disabled or ailing patient and the curator and conservator as practitioners of

cure.²⁸ While conservators such as Jill Sterrett have begun to reframe the work of conservation by questioning longevity as its highest purpose, there is as yet no recognition of the ableist foundation of conservation practice where a medical model is still the dominant one.²⁹ Within this medicalizing view, the art object is treated as if flawed by a dangerous mortality that demands life-sustaining procedures to halt or reverse the decay. Or, if the art object is truly one of inherent vice, meaning that there is no intervention that will halt material decay, then, as art conservator Glenn Wharton notes, the work is “considered effectively ‘dead,’ they are not exhibited and are archived in museum graveyards solely for research purposes.”³⁰ *Crip Materiality* attends to the central question of how to think with, care for, and center unintentionally deteriorating art objects as valuable in their own right as opposed to expendable or “dead.” By extending questions of presumptive ability, *Crip Materiality* stimulates new ethical considerations to reframe pedagogical goals, conservation practices, and art objects within the academic fields of art history and disability studies, and within art institutions themselves.

The Methodologies of a Disability Studies Centered Art History: Biography, Subject Matter, and Style

²⁸ Corzo and Getty Conservation Institute, *Mortality Immortality?*; Vivian van Saaze, *Installation Art and the Museum: Presentation and Conservation of Changing Artworks* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam Univ. Press, 2013); Szmelter, *Innovative Approaches to the Complex Care of Contemporary Art*.

²⁹ Ann Temkin and Elisabeth Sussman, “Uncertain Mandate: A Roundtable Discussion on Conservation Issues,” in *Eva Hesse* (San Francisco : New Haven: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art ; Yale University Press, 2002).

³⁰ Glenn Wharton, “The Challenges of Conserving Contemporary Art,” in *Collecting the New: Museums and Contemporary Art*, ed. Bruce Altshuler (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007), 167.

In order to fully understand the need for and function of crip materiality, I want to underscore the significance of the three methodologies most often used when considering the intersection of disability studies and art history: biography, subject matter, and style.³¹ Although scholars studying the broad intersection of disability studies, crip theory, art history, material culture, and visual culture do not yet identify a singular label for this scholarship, for the sake of clarity, I'll be referring to it as *crip art history*.

One of the most common approaches for thinking about crip art history is in relation to the biography and lived experience of the artist. Scholars consider questions like: Was this artist disabled? Did that disability effect, influence, or shape the art produced? How have art institutions and scholars contextualized or obfuscated this information from their records and interpretive materials? A biography-based approach is often used in conjunction with what we might call an *activist model* of crip art history where disabled artists celebrate the richness and vibrancy of the lived experience of disability through self-representation in order to point out, among other things, the often-erased histories of artists' disabilities or the way that art institutions characterize these disabilities not as generative sources of creativity, but merely medical conditions that the artist was forced to overcome.

There are many reasons to make use of a biographical approach as it allows students and scholars to reclaim artists whose disability was obfuscated or forgotten. It also recognizes the creative, professional, and cultural possibilities of disability that exceed a simplistic medical context to construct a more complex understanding of disability identity. Additionally, this approach acknowledges that disabled artists don't simply reflect the worlds in which they live, but rather that through their art, they produce political and cultural change. For example, the

³¹ This section is adapted from: Cooley, "Fine Arts."

work of disabled artist and curator Riva Lehrer attends to a world that normally overlooks the beauty of disabled bodies and minds by creating portraits of herself and other disabled people that point out the ableist assumptions underlying traditional notions of beauty while also formulating an alternate aesthetic that positions disability as central rather than as the extreme limit or aberrant exception.

Subject matter is an equally significant methodology for scholars of crip art history. This approach asks: Is there a depiction of a disabled person? Is disability represented as a negative stereotype or as a nuanced identity? Does that representation reveal something about the time and place that the art was created? Often, attention to subject matter seeks to locate cultural, social, and political constructions of disability within the representation itself. This approach can be used alongside what we might call a *historical model* of crip art history where art helps us to recognize and critique the way disability was contextualized at a certain moment in time or place. For example, we can look at the way medical theaters were painted by nineteenth-century American artist Thomas Eakins after the American Civil War as reflecting a simultaneously oppressive and subversive approach to disability.³² Or, what does Marc Quinn’s sculpture of *Alison Lapper Pregnant* convey about the visibility of disability in the public sphere?³³

There are several reasons to consider subject matter as it helps to build a historical archive for disabled people whose identity was either erased from the record or was seen as so unwanted or aberrant that it was simply overlooked. It also establishes a way to think more

³² Jessica A. Cooley, “An Inartistic Interest: Civil War Medicine, Disability, and the Art of Thomas Eakins,” in *Disability and Art History from Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Ann Millett-Gallant and Elizabeth Howie, Interdisciplinary Disability Studies (New York: Routledge, 2021).

³³ Ann Millett-Gallant, “Sculpting Body Ideals,” in *The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 51–81.

critically about how disability as an identity was produced and formed over time. That is, disability is not static but shifts depending on changing cultural values. Something to keep in mind while thinking about subject matter is that it can result in considering only recognizable disabilities. Or it can also problematically place the viewer in the position of seeking out and potentially retroactively diagnosing disability in art. Arguably, this diagnostic vision reproduces the same oppressive medical gaze that the activist model has fought against in an effort to return the agency of representation back to disabled people.

A third approach to disability and art is stylistic. That is, does the mode of representation – the brush stroke, composition, use of line, etc. – convey disability even if the artist is not disabled nor is there a disabled subject represented? Disability studies scholar Tobin Siebers considers the use of broken and disjointed brushstrokes by modern artists like Pablo Picasso as a revaluing of disability and indeed the expression of a certain attraction to the aesthetics of disability. Siebers provocatively claimed that “disability aesthetics embraces beauty that seems by traditional standards to be broken, and yet it is not less beautiful, but more so, as a result.”³⁴ Siebers posits that we don’t see disability broadly in art history because we have limited our gaze to look for visibly recognizable disabled people as opposed to the aesthetic, or perhaps even style, of disability. In this way, disability is opened to the expansive possibilities of recognizing, for example, the fragmented and disjointed works of Pablo Picasso as embodying, both physically and affectively, a disability experience.³⁵

While the three methodologies outlined above are important and will endure as productive ways to approach crip art history, new methodologies are needed to expand the scope

³⁴ Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, 3.

³⁵ Siebers, 44.

of crip art historians' engagement with artists, institutions, and art objects to keep pace with the insidious prevalence of ableism. Crip materiality offers one such methodology to think with the material fibers and the physical presence of art objects alongside conservation and curatorial discourses that mimic ableist standards regarding the value and care of those art objects.

Context for Material Matters

Throughout *Crip Materiality* I consider how art objects and architecture have their own agency to produce meaning outside of artistic or institutional intentionality. I also contend that the material shifts in the art and architectural object carries its own ability to create meaning that shifts with its changing molecular structures. My articulation of the ways in which art objects are not only contextualized as disabled but materially occupy a crip existence and aesthetic is possible due to the scholarship most generally called *New Materialism*.

In the introduction to Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman's edited volume *Material Feminisms*, they point to the contentious space that scholars have negotiated between a notion of materialism that might essentialize identity categories and a discursive turn that has led to profoundly generative questions and assertions, yet seems to reduce the material of the body to a mere discursive construction:

Materiality, particularly that of bodies and natures, has long been an extraordinarily volatile site for feminist theory – so volatile, in fact, that the guiding rule of procedure for most contemporary feminisms requires that one distance oneself as much as possible from the tainted realm of materiality by taking refuge within culture, discourse, and language.³⁶

³⁶ Stacy Alaimo and Susan J. Hekman, eds., "Introduction: Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory," in *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 1.

Even the discourse of materiality is itself a fragile object bound to fail under the pressure of discursive analysis. And yet, as Alaimo and Hekman assert – along with numerous other scholars positioned in the fields emerging from new materialism, this distinction between discursive analysis and a materialist orientation establishes a false dichotomy. A false dichotomy that is also acknowledged by disability studies scholars like Alison Kafer and Kim Q. Hall who note that the prevalence of the discursive turn has produced an overly simplified framework for dividing scholarship on disability into a medical model versus a social model. The medical model essentializes the material bodies of people, and the social model then serves as the redeeming discursive turn that denaturalizes disability as a social or discursive construct.³⁷ To embrace the materiality of bodily existence is to also recognize that pain or fatigue are not just social constructs, but also materially felt, which is certainly a perspective that owes much to Phenomenological discourses. As Alaimo and Hekman write, “[We] *have* bodies; these bodies have pain as well as pleasure ... We need a way to talk about these bodies and the materiality they inhabit.”³⁸ Although this quote might make it seem that this is a simple inversion to now privilege a material turn, it is in fact a call to alleviate the reliance on duality itself as a critical framework. Kim Q. Hall observes that one of the consequences of creating the false dichotomy between material body and discursive analysis is a construction of a disembodied disability subjectivity: “In its rejection of the medical model, has disability studies inadvertently idealized a disabled subject free from limitations or bodymind pain and failure...to what extent has

³⁷ Kim Q. Hall, “New Conversations in Feminist Disability Studies: Feminism, Philosophy, and Borders,” ed. Kim Q. Hall, *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 3; Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 7.

³⁸ Alaimo and Hekman, “Introduction: Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory,” 4.

disability studies privileged the experiences of the ‘healthy disabled’.”³⁹ That is, both from a feminist and a disability studies perspective, scholars are acknowledging that material matters.

Significantly, even Judith Butler would seemingly be attending to this material turn when she writes: “What I would propose in place of these conceptions of construction is a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as *a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter.*”⁴⁰ Yet, as Karen Barad argues, Butler does not in fact bridge the gap between material nature and discursive practices:

Are there significant ways in which matter matters to the very process of materialization? In other words, while Butler correctly calls for the recognition of matter’s historicity, ironically, she seems to assume that it is ultimately derived (yet again) from the agency of language or culture. She fails to recognize matter’s dynamism.⁴¹

Barad makes a compelling argument that while Butler, as well as Michel Foucault, seem to espouse that materiality matters, they largely end up re-inscribing material worlds as passive clay upon which ideology and value are then molded. Significantly, both Butler and Foucault produce their scholarship within the framework of the human, while scholars from new materialist backgrounds contend that materiality matters precisely by destabilizing the categorical differentiation between human / non-human, living / dead, subject / object.

This destabilization of the divide between human and non-human is of particular importance to my dissertation project which takes up art objects – those things that would by traditional categories be marked as non-human, dead, and object – as having agency and of

³⁹ Hall, “New Conversations in Feminist Disability Studies: Feminism, Philosophy, and Borders,” 3.

⁴⁰ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 9.

⁴¹ Karen Michelle Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 64.

matter with human interaction but also mattering outside of the human. One might wonder how this is not simply a re-objectification of non-normative bodies. By contending with deteriorating art objects and disabled bodies I am not simply conflating the two but illuminating the fact that they are always and already entangled and enmeshed. However, it is important to note that this process of destabilizing the boundaries between human and non-human should not be confused with anthropomorphism, which would be the overlay of human characteristics onto non-human subjects and objects. Anthropomorphism, as understood specifically within art historical contexts via Michael Fried and Briony Fer, maintains the dualistic categorization of human and non-human.⁴² Crip materiality is not a projection, nor even an intertwining or braiding of human and non-human, but a fluid enmeshment along the spectrum of what we understand to be both human and non-human. Following in the wake of Jill H. Casid's conceptualization of the necrocene that "calls on us to attune our senses differently to attend to the more-than-human agentic forces of dying and decay," I am proposing that we consider the art institution as a place to push beyond the human to demand a way of thinking with marginalized and excluded forms of mattering, including decay and the irreparable.⁴³

Crip materiality is also indebted to work done by scholars like Mel Chen and Eunjung Kim who write about *inhumanisms*.⁴⁴ The title of Mel Y. Chen and Dana Luciano's introduction

⁴² Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 150 and 157; Briony Fer, *The Infinite Line: Re-Making Art After Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 105–8.

⁴³ Jill H. Casid, "Doing Things with Being Undone," *Journal of Visual Culture* 18, no. 1 (2019): 34.

⁴⁴ Mel Y Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Mel L. Chen and Dana Luciano, eds., "Queer Inhumanisms," *GLQ* 21, no. 2–3 (June 2015); Eunjung Kim, "Why Do Dolls Die? The Power of Passivity and the Embodied Interplay Between Disability and Sex Dolls," *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 34, no. 3–4 (2012): 94–106; Eunjung Kim, "Unbecoming Human: An Ethics of

to the special issue on “Queer Inhumanisms” in the journal *GLQ* is “Has the Queer Ever Been Human?”⁴⁵ The question reverberates across a multiplicity of non-normative bodies who have either legally or culturally been marked as non-human animal, as property, as anything other than occupying that hallowed ground called human. Who gets counted as human? That is, which bodies and minds matter enough to be granted rights, protections, and space? There is a sense that human beings who are cast as non-human because of race, disability, sexuality, religion, or gender are in fact materially lacking. And I do mean materially as in the actual material stuff of the body. A material existence that does not register as what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson terms the “normate” (via Erving Goffman), is lacking the material stuff of what counts as human. Garland-Thomson writes: “[the normate] names the veiled subject position of cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate’s boundaries.”⁴⁶ Non-normative bodies are marked as material violations that displace them from the privileges of human-status and relegates them to animal and object status. So, what happens when instead of rejecting our animal and object status by whitening, thinning, curing, and conforming; it is the human that is rejected? What happens when kinship is formed and identification is sought with those related material violations that are also not deemed human, like our beds, the insect world under our feet, and for the sake of this dissertation, the art objects that reach out by way of decaying appendages into our space and disrupt the confines of the museum as mausoleum? It is here where I believe we can begin to untangle the rigid confines of

Objects,” ed. Mel L. Chen and Dana Luciano, *GLQ*, Queer Inhumanisms, 21, no. 2–3 (June 2015): 295–320.

⁴⁵ Mel L. Chen and Dana Luciano, “Has the Queer Ever Been Human?,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Queer Inhumanisms, 21, no. 2–3 (June 2015): 183–207.

⁴⁶ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 8.

the discourse that limits the ways that we care for the mad, weak, and structurally unsound art and architectural objects. It is here where I believe we can continue caring with and for those promises to transform the art institution.

Brief Outline of Chapters

I demonstrate the practical application of crip materiality through a set of case studies that comprise the three chapters of the dissertation. Chapter One, “Mad Objects: Claes Oldenburg’s *Soft Screw*” takes up the case of Claes Oldenburg’s 1975, polyurethane sculpture, *Soft Screw* which has been identified by museum professionals as an object of inherent vice. I argue that the unintended physical breakdown of *Soft Screw* is interpreted by curators and conservators not as disability generally, but specifically as a psychological break. Through the lens of disability studies, I aim to revalue the self-destruction of the art object, or what I will call “mad objects,” to reframe and challenge the role of the museum as guarantor of Enlightenment values founded on ableist standards of rationality and individuality.

Chapter Two, “Weak Art: The Care of Eva Hesse,” examines the discourse and conservation around the artwork of Eva Hesse who died of a brain tumor and many of whose sculptural artworks, especially those made of volatile plastics such as the major piece *Expanded Expansion* (1969), have been subject to radical decay. The deterioration of *Expanded Expansion* past the point of recognizability raised the fundamental ontological question of whether it could still be considered an artwork at all or might rather be consigned as defunct or “dead objects.” This conversation is emblematic of the larger discourse surrounding both the care of Eva Hesse’s oeuvre, in particular, and the care of what I refer to as “weak art” or art that subsists after it has lost its primary distinguishing characteristics or identity as an art object. The literature on Hesse

has yet to confront how ableism shapes these conversations. I argue that Hesse's heavily deteriorated works demand a reevaluation of weakness. I develop the argument that *weak art* implicitly challenges the art museum's determination of value based on a market logic that commodifies both art and artist and indexes value to fitness in terms of a eugenic model. At the same time, weak art provides the basis for a major shift in aesthetic value founded on weakness.

Chapter Three, "Aspirational Access (at The Barnes Foundation): Dreaming Spaces of Belonging," focuses on The Barnes Foundation, its original deteriorating building, and the role that disability played in narratives regarding modifications to that building. Specifically, I consider how one of the galleries (the so-called "Dutch Room") at the original Merion location was destroyed in order to build an elevator. In recent years, the removal of this gallery to make room for an elevator was linked to legal requirements to comply with the ADA. Yet, based on my research, it was not a legal requirement, but a voluntary choice made by the museum's board in the mid-1990s. The subsequent construction of this narrative positions the ADA as a damaging force and disability as a threat to the very structure of the institution. I will argue against the presumption that ADA compliance is destructive to art institutions and instead lay out new protocols that centers structural changes as a mode of radical care both for the physical building, the art it houses, and the bodies that occupy it. This radical care aligns with what Mia Mingus calls "access intimacy," or the profound recognition between people (and institutions and art objects) that access is not a side project but pivotal to the very existence of a building, a work of art, and disabled people.⁴⁷ I ask what would happen if instead of positioning disability accommodation within the museum as inherently destructive – altering historic buildings and the cost of doing so – accessibility was approached from a place of deep and radical care that

⁴⁷ Mingus, "Access Intimacy: The Missing Link."

embraced the material precarity of the structure of the institution, the material precarity of the art objects within them, and the diverse embodiment of the bodies that move in and out of these spaces?

Introduction Figures



Figure 1. Claes Oldenburg (American, b. Sweden 1929), *Soft Screw* [installation in the Chazen Museum of Art's Objects Study Room], 1975, 121.3 x 37.2 cm (47 3/4 x 14 5/8 in.), cast elastomeric urethane with a mahogany base. Collection of the Chazen Museum of Art, Terese and Alvin S. Lane Collection. Accession No.2012.54.44.6



Figure 2. Eva Hesse, *Expanded Expansion*, 1969, [Photograph from the 1980s], fiberglass, polyester resin, latex, and cheesecloth, 10 ft. 2 in. x 25 ft. (309.9 x 762 cm) overall. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York Gift, Family of Eva Hesse, 1975. 75.2138 © Eva Hesse



Figure 3. Left: The Barnes Foundation and Martha Lucy, eds., *Mark Dion, Judy Pfaff, Fred Wilson: The Order of Things* (Philadelphia: The Barnes Foundation, 2015), 48. Right: Reinstallation of the Dutch Room for *Mark Dion, Judy Pfaff, Fred Wilson: The Order of Things* (Philadelphia: The Barnes Foundation, 2015)

Chapter 1

Mad Objects: Claes Oldenburg's Soft Screw

Abstract: This chapter takes up the case of Claes Oldenburg's (American, born Sweden, 1929) 1978 polyurethane sculpture, *Soft Screw* which has been identified by museum professionals as an object of "inherent vice." Inherent vice is a museum term to classify art composed of one or more materials known to degrade, corrode, or cause the object as a whole to fall apart in a way that cannot be stopped or prevented by conservation science. I argue that the negative moral judgment attendant in the term "inherent vice" reveals the extent to which ableism (prejudice against disability) extends to the treatment of art objects that fail to adhere to normative standards of physical fitness or to cohere and remain stable over time. I further contend that the unintended physical breakdown of an object like *Soft Screw* is interpreted by curators and conservators not as disability generally, but specifically as a psychological break. Through the lens of disability studies, I aim to revalue the self-destruction of the art object, or what I will call "mad objects," to reframe and challenge the role of the museum as guarantor of Enlightenment values founded on ableist standards of rationality and individuality.

Introduction

Between 1974 and 1976, Claes Oldenburg (American, born Sweden, 1929), in collaboration with Gemini G.E.L., cast thirty-one editions of an elastomeric polyurethane with mahogany base sculpture titled *Soft Screw* (an edition of twenty-four sculptures, plus three artist's copies, one special copy, and three publisher's copies). The University of Madison-Wisconsin's Chazen Museum of Art owns the twelfth edition. It is a four-foot long, representational sculpture of a black, right-handed, flathead, single-threaded screw, with twenty-seven helical threads and grooves, horizontally propped up by plexiglass supports cut to fit each groove (Fig. 4).⁴⁸ If you visit the Chazen Museum of Art's Objects Study Room where *Soft*

⁴⁸ A detailed description of "Soft Screw" from Orion Analytics: "The Chazen Soft Screw is one in an edition of multiple elastomeric polyurethane sculptures by Claes Oldenburg (American, born Sweden, 1929) known as The Soft Screw. Gemini G.E.L. Produced *The Soft Screw* for Oldenburg between 1974 and 1976. According to the Gemini G.E.L. Online Catalogue Raisonné entry for the edition (#38.34), Gemini cast thirty-one sculptures from the same mold: an edition of twenty-four sculptures, plus three artist's copies, one special copy, and three publisher's copies. According to the Online Catalogue Raisonné, identification numbers were part of the mold and the edition number was changed each time a sculpture was approved. Each sculpture in

Screw is housed you will also find pooled under its tip a small puddle of waxy, blueish-black substance because this sculpture is unexpectedly melting (Fig. 5). Originally, it was intended to stand on its head, erect in a vertical position, allowing the softness of its polyurethane material to bend slightly under the weight of gravity (Fig. 6). Due to the unexpected volatility of the particular polyurethane used, *Soft Screw* now rests flaccid and horizontal, oozing its own contents out onto the table below.

Claes Oldenburg is associated with the Pop Art movement and is perhaps most well-known for his large-scale public sculptures and his “soft sculptures” of banal objects and everyday products of consumer culture such as lipsticks, clothespins, and flathead screws.⁴⁹ His soft sculptures could briefly be described as oversized representations of familiar objects that Oldenburg recreates with fabric, latex, and vinyl, among other materials, and then stuffs with foams and rubbers. Oldenburg’s use of fabrics and plastics to create his soft sculptures reflected the wider trend of artists in the 1960s and 70s to move away from the traditional sculpture materials like bronze, marble, or generally durable and long-lasting materials toward experimentation with new ones that arguably resulted from the explosion of plastics production

The Soft Screw edition resembles a right-hand, single-thread screw that displays a flat countersunk slotted head, 27 helical threads and grooves, and a shaft that tapers to a point (fig. 1). The cast polyurethane screw rests loose atop a sloping wood base that tilts the screw, imparting a subtle curve to the flexible sculpture. James Martin, “Orion Analytics, LLC. Condition Report for the Chazen Museum of Art’s Edition of Claes Oldenburg’s ‘Soft Screw,’” September 22, 2009, Object File, 2012.54.44.6, The Chazen Museum of Art. Martin.

⁴⁹ These are “familiar” and “banal” objects in terms of western cultures, particularly the United States. For example, Oldenburg created a giant, inflatable ice bag for the U.S. Pavilion at the World’s Fair in Japan and upon arriving in Japan, Oldenburg realized that the “Japanese spectators had no idea of what an ice bag was supposed to be for. ‘It turned out that the ice bag was *really* an exotic object over there,’” Roy Bongartz, “Oldenburg Draws Seven New Wonders of the World,” *Horizon* 14, no. 2 (Spring 1972): 81.

following the Second World War.⁵⁰ Oldenburg's soft sculptures did not replicate the shiny, pristine, or even desirable aesthetics associated with consumer products of the 1960s – 70s. Instead, Oldenburg's soft sculptures were intentionally gritty, fleshy, worn out, and imbued with human qualities that function as subtle, and also overt, metaphors for human anatomy, erotic desires, and bodily functions. This anthropomorphic aesthetic both defamiliarized the object represented while also creating a deep familiarity, even kinship, with it so that people might, in Oldenburg's words, "not feel so different from these objects and the animate/inanimate schism [is] mended."⁵¹ The main focus of this chapter is not on Oldenburg the man and artist, but in the radical potentiality for an artwork like *Soft Screw* that becomes possible when contextualized outside the traditional literature and scholarship surrounding Oldenburg.

While one might consider the slow deterioration of *Soft Screw* as an unexpected *memento mori* whose fragility invites us to reflect upon our inevitable deaths, I believe that there is something more radical at work here; something in the way of resistance. I contend that *Soft Screw*'s material instability pulls the curtain back on the untenable ground upon which the desire for cohesiveness was constructed in the first place. To take up queer theorist Judith Butler's and crip theorist Robert McRuer's call to "work the weakness in the norm," the volatile state of *Soft Screw* calls out the ableist construction of "museum quality" objects that often adhere to a eugenic "survival of the fittest."⁵² Therefore, the very presence of the deteriorating *Soft Screw* within museum collections subverts the ideals and norms that art institutions rely upon to then undervalue those same unstable artworks. It points out that understanding stability, cohesiveness,

⁵⁰ S. T. I. Mossman et al., eds., *The Development of Plastics*, Special Publication, no. 141 (Cambridge: Royal Society of Chemistry, 1994).

⁵¹ Oldenburg quoted in: Barbara Rose, *Claes Oldenburg* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970), 168.

⁵² Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 113 and 237; McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 30.

and material durability in art objects as the norm is not only flawed, but impossible. *Soft Screw* is the exaggerated failure that calls out the ways in which most art objects in the museum are also shifting and changing even if only at the microscopic level. By considering the unruly behavior of *Soft Screw* through the lens of crip materiality, I underscore the need to rethink a value system that privileges material stability, and I also ask us to think deeply about what it means to care for objects of inherent vice. Crip materiality calls us to reposition these ostensibly unwanted facets of art objects as valuable, even desirable, and transforms the way we understand objects of inherent vice.

By building on the work of disability studies scholars who revalue mental illness and mental disabilities and amend the discourse so that “madness” is not read as an inherent vice but something meaningful and important in its own right, I believe that *Soft Screw* constitutes a new object category, one that I am calling *mad objects*.⁵³ *Soft Screw* does not comply with Claes Oldenburg’s intention and does not comply with the evaluative norms of the original private collector nor the evaluative norms of the art museum where it is currently housed. Even critics and historians recognized something outside the norm in Oldenburg’s works as Lucy Lippard suggested in an article that was later turned into an exhibition titled *Eccentric Abstraction* that

⁵³ For more on mad pride/ studies literature and scholarship see: Susanne Antonetta, *A Mind Apart: Travels in a Neurodiverse World* (New York: J P Tarcher, 2007); Elizabeth J. Donaldson, ed., *Literatures of Madness: Disability Studies and Mental Health*, 1st ed. 2018, Literary Disability Studies (Cham: Springer International Publishing : Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-92666-7>; Brenda A. LeFrançois, ed., *Mad Matters: A Critical Reader in Canadian Mad Studies* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2013); Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson, “Rethinking Rhetoric through Mental Disabilities,” *Rhetoric Review* 22, no. 2 (2003): 156–67; Margaret Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life*, Corporealities (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011); Ellen Samuels, “My Body, My Closet: Invisible Disability and the Limits of Coming-out Discourse,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9, no. 1–2 (2003): 233–55; Helen Spandler, Jill Anderson, and Bob Sapey, eds., *Madness, Distress and the Politics of Disablement* (Bristol Chicago: Policy Press, 2015).

“Eccentric abstraction has been called ‘sick’ and ‘the aesthetic of nastiness’, or ‘funny-looking’.”⁵⁴ An artwork like *Soft Screw*, that was considered ‘sick’ even before its unexpected deterioration could now be categorized as a non-compliant object in addition making it a *mad object*.⁵⁵

Soft Screw: A History of Care

According to the Chazen’s didactics, *Soft Screw* began to show signs of reversion, or the transition from a solid state back to its original liquid state, about twenty-five years after its original casting.⁵⁶ As Maria Saffiotti-Dale, Curator of Paintings, Sculpture and Decorative Arts at the Chazen Museum of Art, explains “since they [*Soft Screw*] were made over a period of two years they weren’t all made from the same batch...The material itself was fairly new and use by artists of polyurethane was experimental.”⁵⁷ It is unclear if all the editions of *Soft Screw* are undergoing reversion, but records indicate deterioration has also occurred in the editions at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. and the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, Florida.⁵⁸ Some of the editions are not only “oozing” but have also built up a chalky, white residue on the surface. It is assumed that the discoloration and change in finish is related to the reversion process. I will note that, by my observation, the Chazen’s edition is also showing signs

⁵⁴ Lucy R. Lippard, “Eccentric Abstraction,” *Art International* 10, no. 9 (November 1966): 39.

⁵⁵ The concept of non-compliance and disability came from Nakamura, “The Spectacle of Disability (Studies) in the Age of Trump.”

⁵⁶ Chazen Museum of Art, “Object Label for Claes Oldenburg’s ‘Soft Screw’ on Display in the Chazen Museum of Art’s Objects Study Room.,” n.d. See appendix A for full label description.

⁵⁷ “Oldenburg’s ‘Soft Screw’ Sculptures Are Changing Over Time,” *Radio Chipstone* (WUMW 89.7, Milwaukee’s NPR, December 30, 2014), <https://www.wuwm.com/post/oldenburgs-soft-screw-sculptures-are-changing-over-time#stream/0>.

⁵⁸ Aleesha Nissen, Norton Museum of Art to RCAAM@SI-LIST SERV.SI.EDU, “Email, Subject Line: [RCAAM] What to Do with Irreparable Art?,” June 21, 2013, Object File, 2012.54.44.6, The Chazen Museum of Art.

of this white residue, although it is not presently discussed in any of the records regarding its care and conservation.⁵⁹ All of these editions will continue to deteriorate due to the inherent vice of the material in which they were cast. To date, the Chazen’s edition has lost at least three inches from its tip (Fig. 7 – 8). The discovery of this inherent vice was not immediate, however, and, as I will show, the Chazen’s response to it has not been straight forward.

In a 2002 letter to Bernice Rose (the then Director of PaceWildenstein Gallery, which is the representative gallery for Oldenburg’s work), Alvin Lane (the original owner of the Chazen’s edition) wrote with concern that *Soft Screw* was “self-destructing” and that after consultation with the President of Art Conservation Associates there was “no recommended treatment and that ‘the rubber will continue to decompose over time. Consequently, any repairs performed to the sculpture will not remain stabile [sic.]’.”⁶⁰ This was the beginning of an ongoing investigation into answering a question that continues to introduce the Chazen’s wall didactics that accompany *Soft Screw*, “What is happening to the tip of this sculpture?”⁶¹

In the Chazen’s object file for *Soft Screw* there are numerous conversations between museum officials and various conservation specialists consulted in the attempt to find a solution for the sculpture’s deteriorating state. As one conservator wrote, *Soft Screw* offers “a clear case of chemical reversion arising from the materials themselves; that the degradation, in the form of

⁵⁹ “Oldenburg’s ‘Soft Screw’ Sculptures Are Changing Over Time”; Meghan Thumm Mackey to Maria Saffiotti Dale and Victoria Tschanen, “Email, Subject Line: Polurethan Elastomere: ‘Soft Screw’ by Claes Oldenburg,” August 13, 2013, Object File, 2012.54.44.6, The Chazen Museum of Art; It could be that the chalky substance is because “...its plasticizer had migrated to the surface and emerged as white powder” as cited in: XiaoZhi Lim, “These Cultural Treasures Are Made of Plastic. Now They’re Falling Apart.,” *The New York Times*, August 28, 2018, sec. Science, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/28/science/plastics-preservation-getty.html>.

⁶⁰ Alvin Lane to Bernice Rose, “Alvin Lane Letter to Bernice Rose,” March 4, 2002, Object File, 2012.54.44.6, The Chazen Museum of Art.

⁶¹ Chazen Museum of Art, “Object Label for Claes Oldenburg’s ‘Soft Screw’ on Display in the Chazen Museum of Art’s Objects Study Room.”

oozing at the tip, is a slow, continual process that has taken 20-30 years to appear on the pieces, and that it is an inherent vice.”⁶² At one point, the option to create a prosthetic tip for the screw was floated to the director of the Chazen: “Since the mold for the cast sculpture still exists, [James Martin] speculates that it might be possible to do a ‘surgical transplant’ to replace the oozing tip of the sculpture with a newly cast piece.”⁶³ To date, the Chazen has not pursued this option, but further records indicate that this option was never fully dismissed either.⁶⁴

Saffiotti-Dale contacted institutions that owned other editions of *Soft Screw* to gather information about how they were handling the reversion, and, in some cases, other institutions reached out to her as they were equally curious about how to proceed with their editions of *Soft Screw*. In an email with the subject line “What to do with irreparable art?” the assistant registrar at the Norton described that their edition of *Soft Screw* was deteriorating and “cannot be fixed to its original state.” The email continued to wonder what their “options are because everyone agrees it cannot be displayed this way, which also means we are now storing a piece ... [ellipses original] until it completely decays.”⁶⁵ Saffiotti-Dale contacted the National Gallery and in the handwritten notes from a phone conversation between Saffiotti-Dale and Shelley Sturman, Head of the Object Conservation Department, Sturman indicates that they store their edition of *Soft Screw* horizontally in a storage freezer with a frame that supports each of the twenty-seven helical threads. While the National Gallery has not exhibited the work in “a long time,” Sturman

62 Maria Saffiotti Dale to Russell Panczenko, “Email, Subject Line: Oldenburg, Soft Screw,” June 19, 2009, Object File, 2012.54.44.6, The Chazen Museum of Art.

63 Saffiotti Dale to Panczenko.

64 Meghan Thumm Mackey, “Email, Subject: Conservation Estimate for ‘Soft Screw,’” April 2, 2011, Object File, 2012.54.44.6, The Chazen Museum of Art.

65 Aleesha Nissen, Norton Museum of Art to RCAAM@SI-LIST.SI.EDU, “Email, Subject Line: [RCAAM] What to Do with Irreparable Art?,” June 21, 2013.

advised that if it were to be on view it could be for no longer than two months.⁶⁶ The Chazen seems to have adopted some of Sturman's suggestions by creating a support structure where each helical thread is braced by a Plexiglas frame. However, instead of storing the work in a freezer, in 2012 the Chazen placed it on permanent display in their Objects Study Room, a dedicated space where students and visitors can view art in an intimate classroom setting.

In an email from Chazen registrar Andrea Selbig to local conservator Meghan Thumm Mackey, Selbig asked if the display of *Soft Screw* in the Objects Study Room would "...pose any threat to the objects nearby; Lalique glass to one side and Native American ceramics to the other."⁶⁷ In answer to this question, Mackey recommended that the sculpture be isolated from other objects as it is "certain to be off-gassing unknown compounds."⁶⁸ After a few months on display in the Objects Study Room, Mackey was brought in to conduct an additional survey of *Soft Screw* because the tip had begun actively dripping again. Mackey found that while the sculpture was in storage from 2009 to 2012 the "degradation halted or slowed to an imperceptible rate." When *Soft Screw* was moved to the Objects Study Room for display, however, "the conversion of the tip accelerated...heat and/or UV from overhead lighting are likely involved."⁶⁹ From the extant records, it appears that three options were presented for dealing with this new "oozing." First, leave *Soft Screw* "as is, for educational purposes with ooze

66 Maria Saffiotti Dale, "Handwritten Notes from Phone Conversation with Shelley Sturman," April 5, 2011, Object File, 2012.54.44.6, The Chazen Museum of Art.

67 Andrea Selbig to Meghan Thumm Mackey, "Email, Subject: Oldenburg Soft Screw Question," March 13, 2012, Object File, 2012.54.44.6, The Chazen Museum of Art.

68 Meghan Thumm Mackey to Andrea Selbig, "Email, Subject: Oldenburg Soft Screw Question," March 14, 2012, Object File, 2012.54.44.6, The Chazen Museum of Art.

69 Meghan Thumm Mackey Conservation, LLC, "Sampling Report Prepared for Chazen Museum of Art, Oldenburg, Soft Screw," May 1, 2012, Object File, 2012.54.44.6, The Chazen Museum of Art.

visible”; second, clean off the degrading material and then “snip off [the] hanging bit at the end”; or third, “cut off [the] deteriorated tip, recast [the] piece and graft/pin it on.”⁷⁰

In a 2015 classroom conversation I had with the former Director of the Chazen, Russell Panczenko commented that when he learned *Soft Screw* was irreversibly degrading, he considered “throwing the piece out” because of the ostensible harm such an object would do to the value of the Chazen’s collection and the harm it would do Oldenburg’s “market value” should other collectors become aware of the fact that some of his work might be physically compromised. And, indeed, some of Oldenburg’s other cast polyurethane works are undergoing various states of deterioration including the first multiple cast with Gemini G.E.L., *Profile Airflow* (1969) and *False Food Selection* (1966).⁷¹ However, according to Panczenko, other Chazen employees made the case that as a museum attached to a University, there might be some educational value in not deaccessioning the sculpture.⁷² For reasons that might be related to cost, feasibility, or education, the Chazen Museum decided to allow the sculpture to continue to deteriorate (or “ooze” as it is often described in the records) in the Objects Study Room. *Soft Screw* is now permanently housed there and, while all other objects in this room rotate based on the interests of students and curators, *Soft Screw* does not. To date, no action has been taken to clean or replace the tip of the sculpture, but, as the last sentence of the object label that accompanies *Soft Screw* states: “The scientific investigation of this sculpture is ongoing, which

70 Maria Saffiotti Dale, “Handwritten Notes from Meghan Thumm Mackey’s Visit,” March 30, 2011, Object File, 2012.54.44.6, The Chazen Museum of Art.

71 “Claes Oldenburg’s ‘Profile Airflow’ Gets Some TLC,” *Kenneth Tyler Collection* (blog), October 16, 2015, <https://kennethtylercollection.net/2015/10/16/claes-oldenburgs-profile-airflow-gets-some-tlc/>; “Here for the Long Haul,” *Index Magazine, Harvard Art Museums* (blog), November 9, 2017, <https://www.harvardartmuseums.org/article/here-for-the-long-haul>.

72 In-class discussion with former-Director of the Chazen Museum of Art, Art History 602: “The Wet Archive: History, Desire, and Photography’s Liquid Intelligence,” December 4, 2014.

will inform the museum on the best action to take to ensure the preservation of this important work of 20th-century sculpture.”⁷³

At some point while all of these conversations and scientific investigations were happening, the status of *Soft Screw* shifted from original work of art to a teaching object. As Saffioti-Dale explained in an interview, “what we’ve decided is that essentially it [*Soft Screw*] is no longer the original work of art that Claes Oldenburg intended.”⁷⁴ The ambivalence surrounding whether the museum should continue scientific evaluations and interventions on *Soft Screw* that would ostensibly reestablish the sculpture’s status as an “original work of art,” or if they should embrace its reversion as a teaching object, is evidenced in a 2012 report prepared by conservator, Meghan Thumm Mackey where she writes: “The owners have decided that a treatment of full intervention may be undertaken in the future, i.e. removal of the degraded screw point followed by replacement with a casting or replica.” Mackey concludes that “...to remove the sticky and viscous material of this sculpture is to *decrease the didactic impact* of its degraded state...” [italics provided by author for emphasis].⁷⁵

In response to an interviewer’s observation that sculpture, as a medium in general, evokes a sense of permanence where it is assumed “...to last forever in this state,” Saffioti-Dale replies “And, certainly in museums, that’s our job. The word curator comes from the Latin *curae*, ‘to take care of.’ That’s my job, is to make sure that works of art last. But the reality is that in fact they are constantly changing.”⁷⁶ In other words, Saffioti-Dale is aware of the ways that *Soft*

⁷³ Chazen Museum of Art, “Object Label for Claes Oldenburg’s ‘Soft Screw’ on Display in the Chazen Museum of Art’s Objects Study Room.”

⁷⁴ “Oldenburg’s ‘Soft Screw’ Sculptures Are Changing Over Time.”

⁷⁵ Meghan Thumm Mackey Conservation, LLC, “Sampling Report Prepared for Chazen Museum of Art, Oldenburg, Soft Screw.”

⁷⁶ “Oldenburg’s ‘Soft Screw’ Sculptures Are Changing Over Time.”

Screw not only upsets the preconceived value structure of what counts as museum quality objects, but more importantly, the way that *Soft Screw* draws attention to the question of whether a curator is a caretaker only in the sense of sustaining the physical longevity of a work of art. Here, a new question arises, what does care mean in the art museum? Can care come in the form of something other than ongoing preservation? Might care instead reflect the needs and potentiality of a work of art outside the standards of museum quality?

In the case of *Soft Screw*, care continues to be understood in terms comparable to that of the “medical model of disability.” In the medical model the focus is squarely placed on individual interventions and analyses that diagnose material failures and then prescribe treatments to correct those same failings. On perpetual display and accompanied by didactics that foreground its material failure, *Soft Screw* might be described as “enfreaked” in an aura of sensationalism where its non-normative characteristics are exaggerated and made to signify crisis, alienation, and deviance at the expense of all other possible characteristics.⁷⁷ The notion of enfreakment recognizes that it is not the person (or thing) itself that is a “freak,” but the process of representation, or, in this case, display, that makes it so. In other words, the treatment and display of *Soft Screw* marks it as a scientific curiosity instead of a work of art. The isolation of the sculpture in the Objects Study Room and the literature that accompanies its display is so focused on the material failure of the work that it presents more like a lab report than the genre of writing we have come to associate with museum didactics. Arguably, including such a detailed report on this sculpture’s material makeup could have been a curatorial tactic to exemplify the fascinating intersection of art and science, though such a justification is not

⁷⁷ David Hevey, “The Enfreakment of Photography,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J Davis, 4th ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 432–46.

provided. This is not to suggest that either chemical or engineering studies of *Soft Screw* are inappropriate. Rather, I ask us to make note of the use of scientific facts to create the discursive surround that both medicalizes *Soft Screw* and enforces its objectification. In exclusively emphasizing the scientific aspects of the material condition, the implication is that the object has lost its aesthetic interest and value. More to the point, the language and proposed care for *Soft Screw* rely on the medical rhetoric of amputation, contagion, surgery, and prosthetics which effectively mark it as disabled. *Soft Screw* is an object of inherent vice coded as disabled where its reversion back to a liquid state is deemed undesirable and in need of curative measures.

And yet, it is not the discursive environment alone that constructs *Soft Screw* as disabled. It is also the fact of its precarious material condition that does so. Museum staff exercise unconscious ableism precisely because objects of inherent vice are materially unstable. I argue that the problem is not that museum staff unconsciously recognize disability in the precarity that defines objects of inherent vice. Rather, the problem is that in recognizing disability, curators and conservators then reinforce and conform to normative, ableist standards that privilege autonomy, wholeness, and longevity in its treatment and valuation. The ingrained ableism that correlates museum quality objects with a kind of “survival of the fittest” insidiously pervades not just art museums, but also the standards of the art market with which museums are entwined. My aim is not to castigate curators and conservators for enforcing ableism but rather to raise awareness of the issue in order to redirect the conversation to a consideration of the possibility that how we care for art objects has a correlation to how we care for people. Perhaps the role of curator as “caretaker” can mean much more than preservation.

The Radical Passivity of Noncompliance

In Claes Oldenburg's manifesto titled *I Am For*, he makes the case for a gritty democratic art understood through consumption, function, and refuse. He writes:

I am for an art that is political-erotic-mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum...I am for art that limps and rolls and runs and jumps...I am for the white art of refrigerators and their muscular openings and closings.⁷⁸

One could interpret this passage as Oldenburg's approval of the changing materiality of an artwork like *Soft Screw*, especially if you put it in conversation with the following excerpt from a 1969 interview:

What about the constant damage to your work?

My work is deliberately fragile. In other words, it says, "This is a rare thing, and if you don't realize it is delicate, you will soon lose it." It is going to be lost anyway, and its inherent fragility accelerates the time element – it will disappear sooner than most other things.

Have the restorers been at your work yet?

Somewhat, yes. It's dreadful, of course; they "embalm" the works and kill them.⁷⁹

These statements were made directly after the interviewer asked Oldenburg about whether it "bothers" him when collectors rearrange his works. He responded, "I have seen some dreadful arrangements of my work, so bad they hurt...Yes, it bothers me...From my point of view the arrangement sometimes ruins the work or my enjoyment of it."⁸⁰ Locating an artist's intention is always fraught, however, I believe that the inherent vice of *Soft Screw* would indeed "bother" Oldenburg. As will be explored below, Oldenburg's employment of the screw motif in his larger oeuvre points us not in a direction of openness to material changes but instead in a direction that

⁷⁸ Claes Oldenburg, "I Am For ...," in *Environments, Situations, Spaces* (Martha Jackson Gallery, 1961), <http://www.walkerart.org/magazine/2013/claes-oldenburg-i-am-for-an-art-1961>.

⁷⁹ John Coplans, "Interview of Claes Oldenburg by John Coplans," *Art in America*, April 1969, 75.

⁸⁰ Coplans, 75.

requires strength and unchanging stability. While Oldenburg might appreciate an artwork whose form is “inherently fragile,” such inherent fragility is not the same as inherent annihilation. In other words, an artwork whose form shifts a little is different than an artwork whose form loses all form.

The employment of the screw motif in Oldenburg’s larger oeuvre is one where physical stability and material soundness are essential. His repetition of the bent and bending screw in drawings, and sculptures culminated in a number of large public projects. First, as a large bridge that would span the Nieuwe Maas River in Rotterdam, Netherlands (Fig. 9); second, as a “high-rise cemetery” titled *Cemetery in the Shape of a Colossal Screw* in São Paulo, Brazil (Fig. 10); and third, as a large outdoor sculpture titled *Screwarch* at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, Netherlands (Fig. 11).⁸¹ Oldenburg’s first use of the screw motif was in 1968 as a kinetic object, but over the next fourteen years it “underwent numerous transformations in materials, shape, situation, and size before achieving its final form in 1983 as an arch in the garden of the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen in Rotterdam in the Netherlands.”⁸² Oldenburg details that it was

...first cast in rigid plastic, it was later recast in a soft elastomeric urethane in an edition of twenty-four. One proof was cast with an aluminum rod inside of it, which was curved around a telephone pole, becoming the master for a bronze casting that returned it to a hard, though curved state. The curved form thwarted its function completely but greatly increased its metaphoric capacity. This curved screw served as the prototype for the large version that followed.⁸³

⁸¹ Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, *Claes Oldenburg, Coosje van Bruggen: Large-Scale Projects* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1994), 356–69.

⁸² Oldenburg and Bruggen, 356.

⁸³ Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, “Screwarch,” *The Official Website of the Artists Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen* (blog), n.d., 356, <http://oldenburgvanbruggen.com/largescaleprojects/screwarch.htm>.

The Nieuwe Maas Bridge project, called the *Screwarch Bridge*, never came to fruition as an actual bridge, however, Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen (his wife and frequent collaborator) still spent a year creating a model of it complete with small-scale versions of buildings and barges surrounding it.⁸⁴ The model reflected a double-span suspension bridge of two screws fully arched so that their bases sat flat on the land while the tips of the screw bent all the way down to meet each other at the midpoint of the bridge.⁸⁵ Significantly, it was the *Soft Screw* editions that he created at Gemini G.E.L. that served as “the original for an edition of four bronze castings of the *Screwarch*...that become part of the Model of the alternate proposal for a bridge over the Nieuwe Maas, Rotterdam, or the Screwarch Bridge.”⁸⁶ The use of *Soft Screw* as the basis for a large, functional bridge, even if that bridge never came to fruition, amplifies that *Soft Screw*’s inherent vice would be an unintended and unwelcome accident in the larger context of the inherent stability required for its “final form” as a motorway bridge spanning the heart of a major city.

Oldenburg’s “high-rise cemetery” titled *Cemetery in the Shape of a Colossal Screw* was originally conceived as one of his “Seven New Wonders of the World,” a series of imaginary mega-works that were commissioned in 1971 by the journal *HORIZON* and published in 1972.⁸⁷ Oldenburg writes that he approached the drawings “as if the new wonders already existed and I was merely recording them, like making postcards in pencil and crayon.”⁸⁸ One of these wonders

⁸⁴ Oldenburg and Bruggen, *Claes Oldenburg, Coosje van Bruggen*, 363.

⁸⁵ Richard H. Axsom and David Platzker, *Printed Stuff: Prints, Posters, and Ephemera by Claes Oldenburg: A Catalogue Raisonné 1958-1996*, 1st ed (New York: Hudson Hills Press in association with Madison Art Center, Wisconsin, 1997), 34.

⁸⁶ R.H. Fuchs, *Claes Oldenburg, Large-Scale Projects, 1977-1980: A Chronicle by Based on Notes, Statements, Contracts, Correspondence, and Other Documents Related to the Works: Monuments* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980), 46.

⁸⁷ Bongartz, “Oldenburg Draws Seven New Wonders of the World,” 70–81.

⁸⁸ Axsom and Platzker, *Printed Stuff*, 205.

was a hi-rise cemetery in the shape of a monolithic screw. Oldenburg's inspiration for this work came from reading that the city of São Paulo in Brazil was so overcrowded that they no longer had room for cemeteries, so what about skyscraper cemeteries instead? He described these 30-story skyscrapers as taking the shape of monolithic screws that for every story filled with the dead, there was a turn of the screw into the ground. There were to be several screws scattered throughout the city all at various stages of descent.⁸⁹ Once the screws had fully descended, the head of the screw would become "... a circular restaurant built into the screwhead," or "a domed ceremonial structure."⁹⁰ Unlike the other "Wonders of the World," Oldenburg's *Cemetery in the Shape of a Colossal Screw* was in fact considered for installation. According to historian Kenneth Finkel, Oldenburg's original proposal for what is now the iconic, 45-foot-tall *Clothespin* sculpture located at Fifteenth and Market streets was his *Cemetery in the Shape of a Colossal Screw* (Fig. 12). Finkel speculates that the idea of placing a *Colossal Screw* in the center of Philadelphia would have caused too great of an offense and that a *Clothespin* was a more acceptable motif.⁹¹ Either way, as fantastical idea or public sculpture proposal, *Cemetery in the Shape of a Colossal Screw* reflects a similar need for physical stability and longevity as the *Screwarch*. Arguably, the cemetery screw presents an even greater need for stability and longevity as structures that purposefully defy decomposition. The act of preserving bodies in a giant cemetery shaped screw is diametrically opposed to the decomposition of *Soft Screw*.

⁸⁹ Axsom and Platzker, 207.

⁹⁰ Bongartz, "Oldenburg Draws Seven New Wonders of the World," 72; Axsom and Platzker, *Printed Stuff*, 207.

⁹¹ Kenneth Finkel, "After All These Years: Political, Erotical and Mystical Claes Oldenburg," *The PhillyHistory Blog* (blog), September 29, 2011, <https://www.phillyhistory.org/blog/index.php/2011/09/after-all-these-years-the-political-erotical-and-mystical-claes-oldenburg/>.

The final proposal for the screw motif, and the one that was actually realized, was what is now permanently installed in the sculpture garden of the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen. Oldenburg and van Bruggen's original proposal for *Screwarch* was to be the new bridge over the Nieuwe Maas River in Rotterdam, but they were aware that "of course we realized how unlikely it was that a large bridge of our design might be chosen by the city, but we proceeded as if it could happen."⁹² While they were working on the drawings and models for the bridge proposal, Wim Beeren, then director of the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, visited their studio and proposed an exhibition containing all of their preparatory work for *Screwarch*. Van Bruggen proposed a large-scale model of *Screwarch* "as large as the indoor space of the museum would allow."⁹³ After the exhibition, *Screwarch* was permanently reinstalled between two reflective pools in the garden of the museum.⁹⁴

Screwarch, *Cemetery in the Shape of a Colossal Screw*, and *Screwarch* for the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen are the "final forms" of Oldenburg's screw motif all of which necessitate the ability to resist the eroding forces of time and weather, and above all the ability to maintain their original form as the safety of the public depended upon it. They are not, as perhaps some of Oldenburg's early writing suggest, compatible with decay and certainly not in the way that multiple editions of *Soft Screw* are currently disintegrating. It is my belief, based on Oldenburg's employment of the screw motif in his larger oeuvre, that *Soft Screw*'s inherent vice and inevitable disintegration were not Oldenburg's intention nor would he welcome this disintegration as part of an allegiance to an art that "...does something other than sit on its ass in

⁹² Oldenburg and Bruggen, "Screwarch."

⁹³ Oldenburg and Bruggen, *Claes Oldenburg, Coosje van Bruggen*, 356.

⁹⁴ Oldenburg and Bruggen, 369.

a museum.”⁹⁵ Again, an artwork whose form is “inherently fragile” is different from an artwork whose form loses all form. In an interview with Arne Glimcher in which she asks him about his soft sculptures of musical instruments, Oldenburg seems to answer this very question. Glimcher asks Oldenburg “Does the point at which the object no longer has its identity fascinate you? Are you pushing the saxophone to that edge? To the point where the witch’s hat disappears in the puddle in *The Wizard of Oz*.” Oldenburg responds: “It’s more a matter of acquiring additional identities, but the object must hang on to its original identity in some way. Its characteristic color, for example, is never abandoned.”⁹⁶

I argue that while Oldenburg has an allegiance to artworks that “do something,” *Soft Screw* is non-compliant as a form of profound un-doing that does not “hang on to its original identity” but that quite literally “disappears in the puddle.” *Soft Screw* refuses and resists the imperative to be. Its noncompliance with Oldenburg’s intentions and its noncompliance to the museum’s standards of object fitness is a denial that parallels the resistance of a person or community to show up as a subject, as a fixed and knowable identity, a negation that is indeed a form of resistance. It is *radical passivity*; a feminist, queer, and crip tactic to resist the assumed obligation to perform gender, sexuality, and ability by way of a liberal understanding of subjecthood. Queer theorist J. Jack Halberstam writes that *radical passivity* “signal[s] another kind of refusal: the refusal quite simply to be...[instead] we find...subjects who unravel, who refuse to cohere; subjects who refuse ‘being’ where being has already been defined in terms of a self-activating, self-knowing, liberal subject.”⁹⁷ The act of unbecoming is also an act of “self-

⁹⁵ Oldenburg, “I Am For ...”

⁹⁶ Claes Oldenburg and Arne Glimcher, *Claes Oldenburg: September 18-October 17, 1992* (New York City: Pace Gallery, 1992), 9.

⁹⁷ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) kindle location 2554 and 2296 of 3504.

destruction” as Alvin Lane lamented about the Chazen’s edition of *Soft Screw*. Yet, this refusal to “be” is not a choice. The deterioration of *Soft Screw* is not chosen in the sense of actively intended. It is the material fact of unbecoming. This material facticity is what makes this not an easy resistance; nor a privileged one. It is a resistance that asks us to rethink what it means to *be*, either as human or art object, at the most fundamental level.

In disability studies scholar Eunjung Kim’s 2012 article “Why Do Dolls Die? The Power of Passivity and the Embodied Interplay Between Disability and Sex Dolls” and her 2015 article “Unbecoming Human: An Ethics of Objects,” Kim considers radical passivity as a concept to revalue disability.⁹⁸ In acknowledging the physical and cognitive realities of disability where bodies and minds may unexpectedly wither, weaken, and paralyze, Kim takes up radical passivity to challenge the eugenic logic that so narrowly defines the human. A definition that often relies on markers of not just nationality, race, citizenship, and employment; but on the most basic levels: unassisted breathing, independent mobility, and the cognitive capacity to reason and communicate in expected ways. Kim suggests that by embracing the object status assigned to people with disabilities – as evident in derisive statements such as “he’s nothing but a vegetable” or “I don’t want to end up a vegetable” – we might be able to reject ability-based logics and open up a more inclusive space for a multiplicity of being and non-being, including identification with and desire for the vegetal world.

This is a particularly important argument for an object like *Soft Screw* because not unlike “severe” or “profound” cognitive or psychological disabilities, *Soft Screw* is not easily assimilated into the art museum through access and accommodation alone because no matter

⁹⁸ Kim, “Why Do Dolls Die? The Power of Passivity and the Embodied Interplay Between Disability and Sex Dolls”; Kim, “Unbecoming Human: An Ethics of Objects.”

what, *Soft Screw* will continue to de-stabilize. So, we are asked to instead rethink our basic understandings of, in the case of *Soft Screw*, what defines a museum quality artwork; and, in the case of “severe” or “profound” cognitive or psychological disabilities, what defines a human. As scholars of disability studies rhetoric argue, because the disability rights movement in the United States followed other rights-based movements that promoted equality through access, independence, and legal protections; the disabled who do not communicate in a normative way, nor are able to live independently, are left outside the movement.⁹⁹ As disability studies scholar Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson argues, the disability rights movement created “...progress in legal rights and improved attitudes toward the disabled for some: for those disabled who can meet the tests of liberal subjectivity. However, people with severe cognitive and psychiatric disabilities still suffer the worst forms of discrimination and stigma...”.¹⁰⁰ In other words, access is not enough. Rethinking our most basic assumptions about what constitutes a human life, or a museum quality art object, is required. Instead of seeking equality and dignity through assimilation into larger society which is in line with a rights-based model where the tactic is to claim likeness with the dominant culture; there needs to be, as queer theorist Michael Warner writes, “a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal.”¹⁰¹ Or, as some queer/crip theorists have already done, there is a need to reject the normal altogether. What if we extend Dana

⁹⁹ A brief, and by no means comprehensive, list of scholars writing about disability rhetoric: Lewiecki-Wilson, “Rethinking Rhetoric through Mental Disabilities”; Eva Feder Kittay, “When Caring Is Just and Justice Is Caring: Justice and Mental Retardation,” *Public Culture* 13, no. 3 (2001): 557–79; James C. Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson, eds., *Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001); Jay Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric*, First Edition, Critical Perspectives on Disability (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014).

¹⁰⁰ Lewiecki-Wilson, “Rethinking Rhetoric through Mental Disabilities,” 159.

¹⁰¹ Michael Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, Cultural Politics, v. 6 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xxvi.

Luciano's and Mel Y. Chen's burning question, "Has the Queer Ever Been Human?" to include disability so that it reads "Has the Queer *and Crip* Ever Been Human?"¹⁰² By the current standards of what "counts" as human, that is those who can "meet the tests of liberal subjectivity," the answer is no. However, and as Luciano and Chen conclude, the answer is also yes. They cite the vital work of Chicana, feminist, and queer theorist Gloria Anzaldúa who explains through her concept of the New Mestiza that the human is fluid and multiple, "You're all the different organisms and parasites that live on your body and also the ones who live in a symbiotic relationship to you. . . . So who are you? You're not one single entity."¹⁰³ By thinking Anzaldúa's New Mestiza alongside *Soft Screw* we might also consider the fluidity and multiplicity of the art object, to bring Oldenburg's words back, to think of *Soft Screw* beyond its ability to "hang on to its original identity in some way."

Soft Screw's non-compliance, its resistant to the intentions of Oldenburg and the desires of the art museum, comes to us in a specific way, that of radical passivity. It is a resistance that in its quiet, slow, and unintended deterioration in fact defies what we think of as resistance itself. It does not "stand up" to anything as the ableist language of so many protests for equality and justice have projected because this artwork cannot stand up. It does not "find its own voice and speak up for itself," because it does not communicate in any normal way. It is quiet in its noncompliance. It is slow in its opposition. It is unexpected in its resistance. It is perhaps part of that other revolution yet to come, the one Halberstam argues "cannot come in the form that we think of as 'revolutionary' – not as a masculinist surge or an armed confrontation. Revolution

¹⁰² Mel L. Chen and Dana Luciano, "Has the Queer Ever Been Human?"

¹⁰³ Mel L. Chen and Dana Luciano, 187. Originally a quote by Gloria Anzaldúa in Mikko Tuhkanen, "Queer Hybridity," in *Deleuze and Queer Theory*, ed. Chrysanthi Niganni and Merl Storr (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 96.

will come in a form we cannot yet imagine.”¹⁰⁴ *Soft Screw* is something that is not *becoming*; it is not a revolution in any form that we can understand. It is obdurately un-becoming and unbecoming. It is something that we cannot yet imagine.

Mad Objects

Another way to theorize the radical passivity of *Soft Screw* is that it is an act of madness. *Soft Screw* is not just breaking with norms of physical comportment and norms of physical material stability, it is a psychological break. By building on the work of disability studies scholars who revalue mental illness and mental disabilities and amend the discourse so that “madness” is not read as an “inherent vice” but also something meaningful and important in its own right, I believe that *Soft Screw* constitutes a new object category, *mad objects*. *Soft Screw* does not comply with Oldenburg’s intention and does not comply with the evaluative norms of the original private collector nor the evaluative norms of the art museum where it is currently housed. The material failure of objects like *Soft Screw*, perform the lack of control that is the defining feature of the legal constitution of mental fitness—that is, to be of sound mind or *compos mentis* is to be in control of one’s mind. To use the language of the original owner, the “self-destruction” of *Soft Screw* signals not just physical breakdown, but material decay as a manifestation of a psychological break or breach of the sanity requirements for museum quality fitness.

Soft Screw refuses to participate either as a financial commodity or as a productive member of the art collection. The art object’s “radical passivity” makes it an example of the

¹⁰⁴ Jack Halberstam, “The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons,” in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), 11.

subversive crip and queer tactic of anti-capitalist refusal.¹⁰⁵ It also then strikes a deeper chord with the term “inherent *vice*” itself which situates *Soft Screw* as morally reprehensible by posing a threat to the very structure of the ostensibly ideal and *virtuous* object, which is thus defined as stable, participatory, and financially secure. It is this alleged moral violation perceived as material threat that makes objects of inherent vice so radically tied to disability.

I propose that we claim these works as a part of crip aesthetics and rename them *Mad Objects* to both invoke the Mad Pride Movement and to call attention to their powerful role in disrupting the status quo of the museum structure. I invoke “madness” to suggest that the moral transgression inherent in “inherent vice” corresponds to the way in which the object becomes not only quarantined but also profoundly unknowable. The presence of works such as *Soft Screw* within art museum collections, compel us to reckon with the decomposition of the *compos mentis*. Such mad objects fracture the standards for museum quality that anchor value to claims of stability and longevity, and they betray the Enlightenment fantasy of the fitness of the body as a materialization of the fitness of the mind as an unsustainable and dangerous illusion. Because, the fact is that all things fall apart eventually due to age, environment, accident, or simply as a result of their inherent material instability. The mad object “works the weakness” of the elusive claim that a stable, ordinary art object ever existed in the first place and threatens the museum’s investment in the production of the unified, Enlightenment subject.¹⁰⁶ Mad Objects invite a new conversation about disability in the art museum, a conversation that embraces access as a matter of altering the deeply embedded ableism that structures the very fibers of art objects.

¹⁰⁵ For more on “radical passivity” as it intersects with queer and crip theory see: Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Kindle location 1677 or 3504; Kim, “Why Do Dolls Die? The Power of Passivity and the Embodied Interplay Between Disability and Sex Dolls”; Kim, “Unbecoming Human: An Ethics of Objects.”

¹⁰⁶ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 113 and 237.

Chapter 1 Figures

Figure 4. Claes Oldenburg (American, b. Sweden 1929), *Soft Screw* [installation in the Chazen Museum of Art's Objects Study Room], 1975, 121.3 x 37.2 cm (47 3/4 x 14 5/8 in.), cast elastomeric urethane with a mahogany base. Collection of the Chazen Museum of Art, Terese and Alvin S. Lane Collection. Accession No.2012.54.44.6



Figure 5. Claes Oldenburg (American, b. Sweden 1929), *Soft Screw* [Detail: installation in the Chazen Museum of Art's Objects Study Room], 1975, 121.3 x 37.2 cm (47 3/4 x 14 5/8 in.), cast elastomeric urethane with a mahogany base. Collection of the Chazen Museum of Art, Terese and Alvin S. Lane Collection. Accession No.2012.54.44.6



Figure 6. Claes Oldenburg (American, b. Sweden 1929), *Soft Screw*, [before deterioration] 1975, 121.3 x 37.2 cm (47 3/4 x 14 5/8 in.), cast elastomeric urethane with a mahogany base. Photo: Sotheby's New York.



Figure 7. Claes Oldenburg (American, b. Sweden 1929), *Soft Screw* [detail of chemical reversion documented by art handlers at the Chazen Museum of Art around 2012], 1975, 121.3 x 37.2 cm (47 3/4 x 14 5/8 in.), cast elastomeric urethane with a mahogany base. Collection of the Chazen Museum of Art, Terese and Alvin S. Lane Collection. Accession No.2012.54.44.6



Figure 8. Claes Oldenburg (American, b. Sweden 1929), *Soft Screw* [detail of chemical reversion documented by author at the Chazen Museum of Art in 2021], 1975, 121.3 x 37.2 cm (47 3/4 x 14 5/8 in.), cast elastomeric urethane with a mahogany base. Collection of the Chazen Museum of Art, Terese and Alvin S. Lane Collection. Accession No.2012.54.44.6

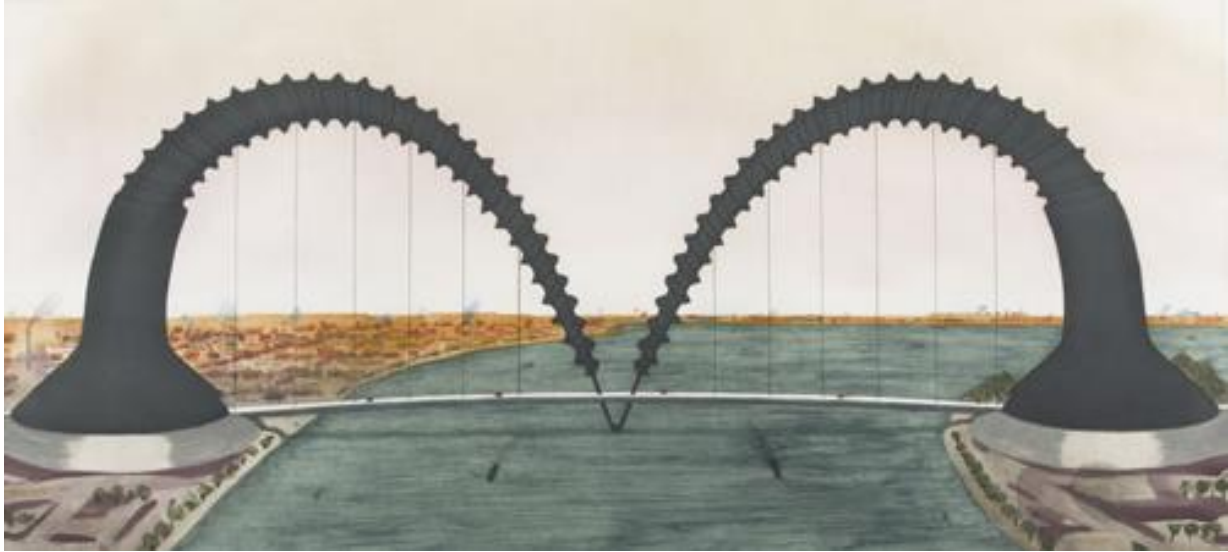


Figure 9. Claes Oldenburg (American, b. Sweden 1929), *Double Screwarch Bridge, State III*, 1981, Etching with aquatint, color monotype, 23 1/2 x 50 1/2 in. Collection of the Chazen Museum of Art, Terese and Alvin S. Lane Collection. Accession No.2012.54.44.8

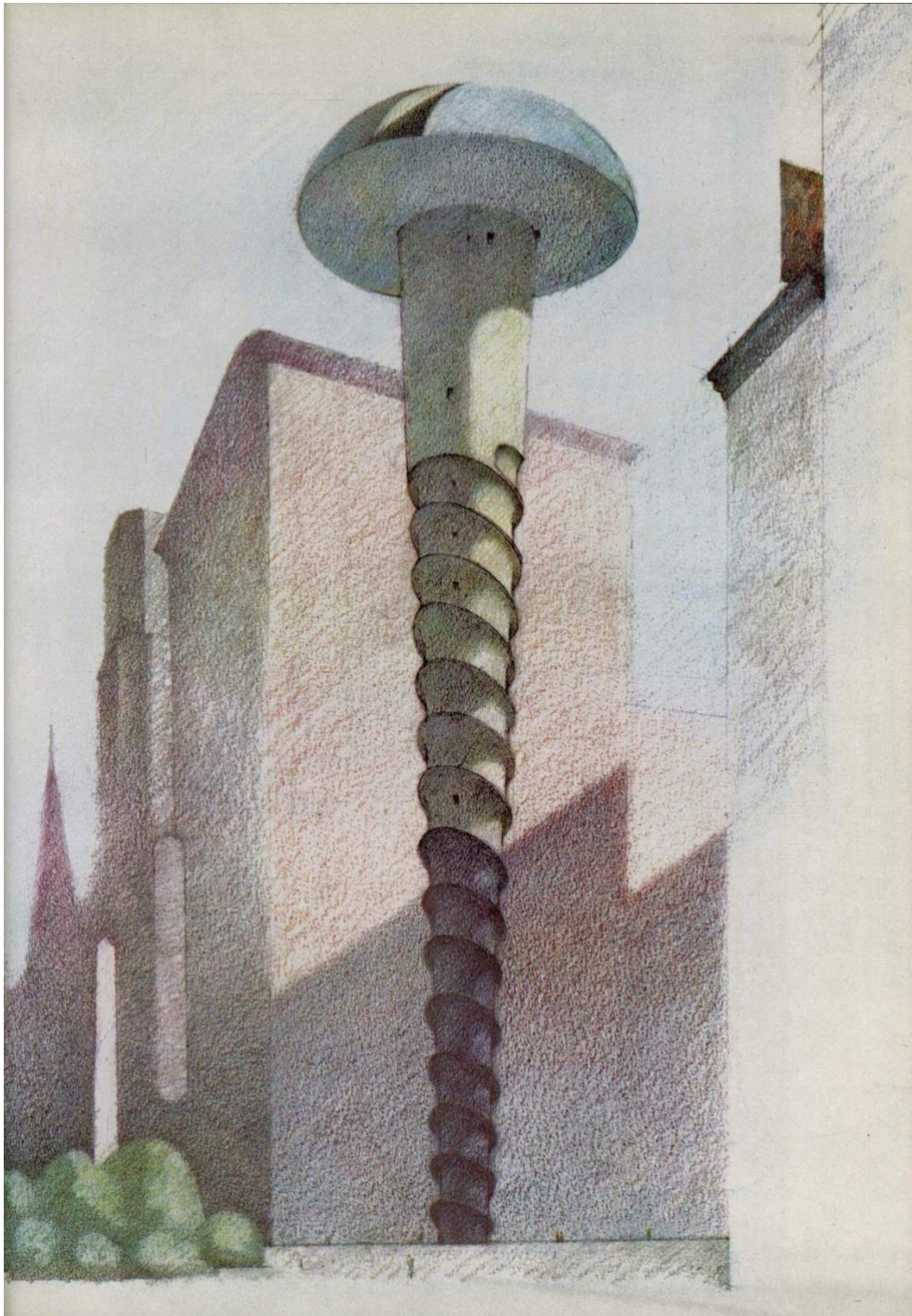


Figure 10. Claes Oldenburg (American, b. Sweden 1929), *Cemetery in the Shape of a Colossal Screw: Skyscraper for São Paulo, Brazil*, 1971, Pencil and colored pencil, 14 ½ x 11 ½ in. (36.8 x 29.2 cm). From Roy Bongartz, "Oldenburg Draws Seven New Wonders of the World," *Horizon* 14, no. 2 (Spring 1972): 73.

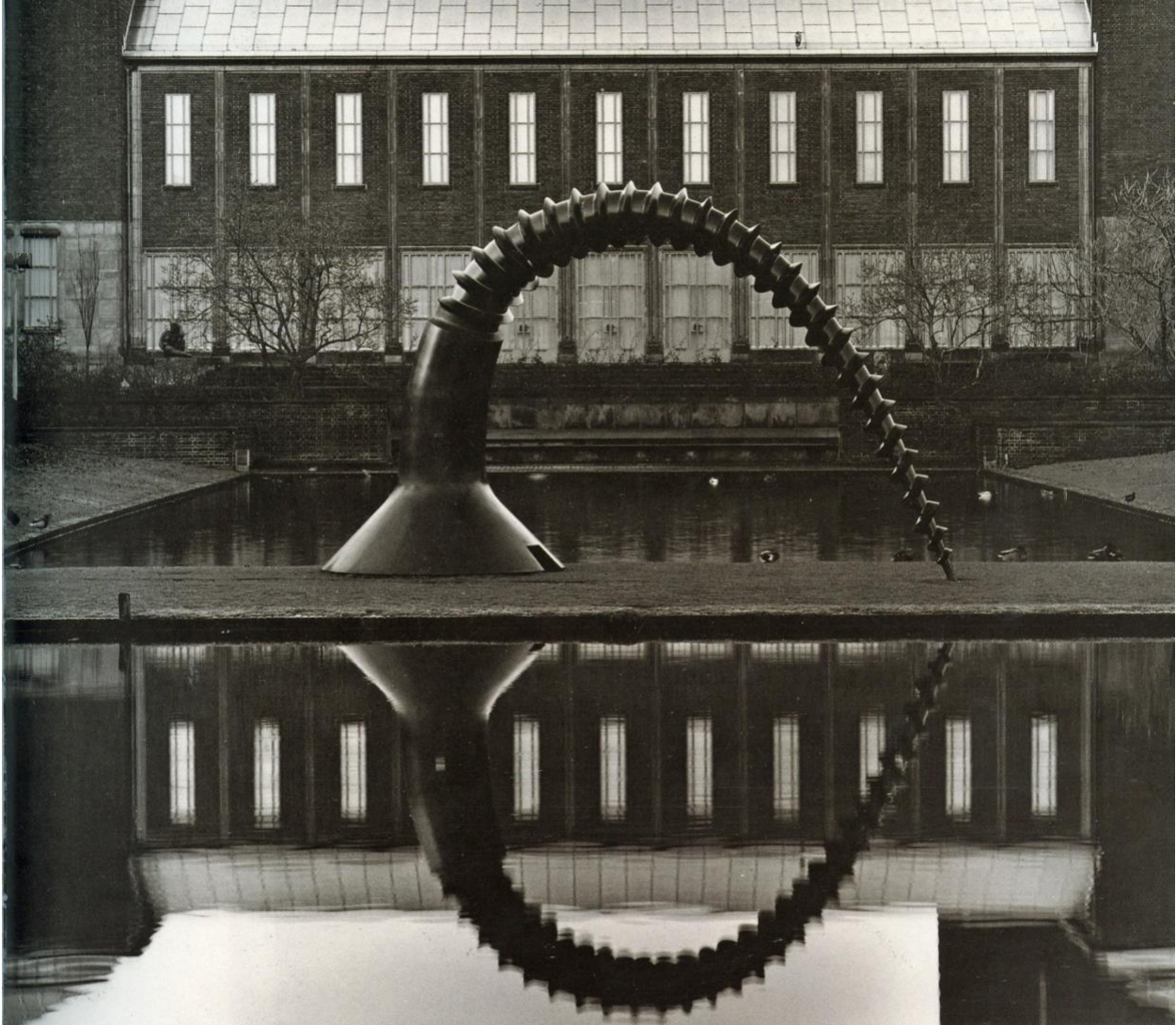


Figure 11. Claes Oldenburg (American, b. Sweden 1929), *Screwarch*, 1983, Aluminum painted with polyurethan enamel, 12 ft. 8 in. x 21 ft. 6 in. x 7 ft. 10 in. (3.86 x 6.55 x 2.39 m). Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam, the Netherlands.



Figure 12. Claes Oldenburg (American, b. Sweden 1929), *Cemetery in the Shape of a Colossal Screw* in Center City, Philadelphia. Image source: Kenneth Finkel for the *Philly History Blog*, “After All These Years: Political, Erotical and Mystical Claes Oldenburg,” Sept. 29. 2011

Chapter 2

Weak Art: The Care of Eva Hesse

Abstract:

Chapter 2 presents a case where it is not only the physical disintegration of an artwork that is in question but also the mental fitness of its maker. A feminist-crip analysis finds that Eva Hesse, a young woman who died of a brain tumor, was questioned and disbelieved by friends, curators, conservators, and scholars due to her doubled status as woman and disabled. Through this case study of Eva Hesse's *weak art*, I argue for a reevaluation of the treatment of the physical disintegration of art, specifically a reevaluation of weakness. I develop the argument that *weak art* implicitly challenges the art museum's determination of value on the basis of a market logic that commodifies both art and artist and indexes value to fitness in terms of a Eugenic model. At the same time, *weak art* provides the basis for a major shift in aesthetic value founded on weakness.

Weak Art

In November of 2000 a roundtable discussion was organized to confront the problem of the conservation of the artwork of Postminimalist artist Eva Hesse (American, born Germany, 1936–1970). Hesse died of a brain tumor, and many of her sculptural artworks, especially those made of volatile plastics such as the major piece *Expanded Expansion* (1969), have been subject to radical decay (Fig. 13 – 14).¹⁰⁷ The roundtable was not only concerned with how to conserve these artworks, but also that their deterioration past the point of recognizability raised the fundamental ontological question of whether they could still be considered artworks at all or might rather be consigned as defunct or “dead objects.” This conversation is emblematic of the larger discourse surrounding both the care of Eva Hesse's oeuvre in particular and the care of what I refer to as *weak art* or art that subsists after it has lost its primary distinguishing characteristics or identity as an art object. This larger discourse of *weak art* casts both Hesse and

¹⁰⁷ Temkin and Sussman, “Uncertain Mandate: A Roundtable Discussion on Conservation Issues.”

her fragile artwork in the agency and value discounting language characteristic of disability. Nonetheless, the literature on Hesse has yet to confront how ableism shapes these conversations.

While it might seem that the label of *weak art* is a derogatory and hurtful way to categorize Hesse's work, it is a term of injury that, in a similar move as queer and crip theory, is meant to re-appropriate while also conserving the negative, shaming word of injury to politicize and decenter the ableist assumptions about what weakness fundamentally means. I argue that weakness, whether physical or mental, is not an immoral, unwanted, or harmful state of being in itself, but that it is the long history of eugenic and capitalist ideologies that makes it so. In part, I extend what many scholars of disability studies and crip theory have called for and also questioned, which is to ask what does it mean, or will it take, to desire disability, to desire it as a primary feature, for instance, of art?¹⁰⁸ I also want to ask what has to change for us not simply to accept, but to value weakness in art, or as a feature of great art? I argue that what I am calling the *weak art* of Eva Hesse is one place to begin to transvalue disability as the source of radical potentiality.

So, what is *weak art*? While it might seem on the surface to be a term that could easily apply to just about any materially precarious object from the crack in the Liberty Bell to the ephemeral snowballs from David Hammons' *Bliz-aard Sale*, there are certain characteristics that distinguish it from what might otherwise be labeled as *institutional critique*, *ephemeral art*, or just broken (Fig. 15).¹⁰⁹ First, Eva Hesse's *weak art* is distinct in the unexpected and destructive

¹⁰⁸ The question of desirability and disability have been raised and questioned in the following publications: Robert McRuer and Abby L Wilkerson, eds., "Desiring Disability: Queer Theory Meets Disability Studies," *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9, Numbers 1-2 (2003); Sandahl, "Queering the Crip or Crippling the Queer? Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance"; McRuer, *Crip Theory*; Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*.

¹⁰⁹ Institutional critique refers to a vein of conceptual art that takes art institutions as the subject of investigation by unveiling their presumably neutral ideologies and questioning the ways in

transformation of its form; a fundamental change understood as a threat to the artwork's essential identity. *Weak art* in this sense is akin to what Catherine Malabou theorizes as “destructive plasticity.” Key to Malabou's conception is that plasticity is not just invention or flexibility. Rather, plasticity holds within itself the potential to undo itself, to transform to the point of annihilation. To quote:

Might there be a type of plasticity that, under the effects of a wound, creates a *certain form of being by effacing a previously existing identity*? Might there be, in the brain, a destructive plasticity—the dark double of the positive and constructive plasticity that moulds neuronal connections? Might such plasticity make form through the annihilation of form?¹¹⁰ [italics original]

Malabou's concept of “destructive plasticity” allows us to think Hesse's *weak art* in terms of a material metaphor that binds together the plastic materiality of her deteriorating plastic sculptures, the plastic weakening of Hesse's brain, and the cancerous growth of the malignant tumor from which Hesse died at 34.¹¹¹ Unexpected destructive plasticity is here doubled as art membrane and material brain. Thus, the physical weakening of these artworks can also be understood as a form of material noncompliance, material non-compos mentis, or, as argued in Chapter 1, even material madness. Second, *weak art* is also art undergoing a durational destruction. This is not a break, or singular crack, but a practice of slow dissolution. So, unlike the crack in the Liberty Bell, which has been fairly well stabilized, there is very little that will

which these institutions create meaning and value objects. Works of institutional critique are intentionally made to die, rot, and decompose in order to subvert the economic structure of the museum. See, Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, 1st paperback ed (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011). “There are many forms of ephemeral art, from sculpture to performance, but the term is usually used to describe a work of art that only occurs once, like a happening, and cannot be embodied in any lasting object to be shown in a museum or gallery.” - <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/e/ephemeral-art>

¹¹⁰ Catherine Malabou, *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage*, 1st ed, *Forms of Living* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), xv.

¹¹¹ Lucy R. Lippard, *Eva Hesse* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 106–80.

stop the continued breakdown of Hesse's more fragile creations. Lastly, *weak art* is not simply a categorization that stands in opposition to strength but is a tactic for subversion where the physical weakness of these art objects calls out the weak ground upon which the valuation of museum quality objects exists in the first place. The notion of "museum quality" being grounded in ableist correlations to a "survival of the fittest" where, for the most part, material stability is highly valued.¹¹² Therefore, the very presence of these deteriorating artworks within museum collections subverts the ideals and norms that the art institution relies upon to then undervalue those same *weak* artworks.

Expanded Expansion, Origin and Becoming

The 2000 roundtable conversation on the conservation of Hesse's work included a number of Hesse's close friends, former studio assistants, representatives from her estate, conservators, and collectors. The point of the roundtable was to share knowledge about her more deteriorated pieces and her creative process from a range of perspectives to consider some of the following questions:

...whether or not what exists today is sufficiently true to the original appearance and meaning of a given sculpture to merit display. Is the condition of the piece so far from the artist's intention that it is better to leave it unseen and make do with photographs of it in good condition? Does one attempt to remake the objects or portions of them, sacrificing literalness to present something true to the spirit of the original?¹¹³

¹¹² An art museum director lists a number of reasons why a work may not be acquired including: "...the condition of the work may be unstable...", see: Joyce Ann Ice, ed., *On Collecting: From Private to Public, Featuring Folk and Tribal Art from the Diane and Sandy Besser Collection* (Santa Fe, N.M. : Seattle: Museum of International Folk Art ; In association with University of Washington Press, 2009), 114; "You can't sell something that is going to self-destruct." See: Lee Rosenbaum, *The Complete Guide to Collecting Art*, 1st ed (New York: Knopf : Distributed by Random House, 1982), 142.

¹¹³ Temkin and Sussman, "Uncertain Mandate: A Roundtable Discussion on Conservation Issues," 291.

This roundtable discussion was later published in the catalog that accompanied the 2002 exhibition *Eva Hesse*. In the introduction, Ann Temkin writes that: “Several of Hesse’s sculptures have deteriorated to the point that they no longer resemble their original selves, and in many cases they cannot be handled and installed as they originally were.”¹¹⁴ Temkin’s statement raises an important question: what does it mean to not resemble oneself as an artwork? That is, what does it mean to be so profoundly different that a fissure is marked to separate a being into a before and an unrecognizable after? What does it mean to exist after you cease to be what you are? The phrasing is perhaps familiar to anyone who has become disabled, has dementia, or who is reeling in the aftermath of a trauma:

“I’m not myself today.”

“She no longer recognized him.”

“The woman I once knew is gone.”

Illness and disability set off a series of these ‘before-and-after’ narratives that hinge on the idea that one indeed has an original self to begin with and that the original self is the authentic one, the best version; it is to be protected; and when lost, it must be mourned and memorialized often at the expense of the new, altered self. The idea though that works of art “no longer resemble their original selves” opens a space where that artwork has seemingly undergone some unavoidable, unwanted, altering state akin to disability, dementia, or trauma. It is a destructive plasticity where to quote Malabou, “Destruction has its own sculpting tools.”¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Eva Hesse, catalog, p. 291

¹¹⁵ Catherine Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 3 and 4.

Consider, for example, the visual rhetoric of the ‘before-and-after’ on display in images of Hesse’s *Expanded Expansion*, which was created in 1969, about one year before Hesse died of a brain tumor in 1970. In Figure 10 we see Hesse standing in front of *Expanded Expansion* when it was originally exhibited in the 1969 exhibition *Anti-illusion: Process /Materials* at the Whitney Museum of American Art. At the time, it appeared as a soft, translucent, skin-like curtain, with its title – *Expanded Expansion* – reflecting its capacity for pliability and movement, indeed plasticity. The work itself is comprised of sixteen fiberglass poles that are about ten feet tall, each connected to the next by a latex covered cheesecloth that, like a folding screen or curtain, can be compressed or expanded into various horizontal dimensions. Figure 11 shows *Expanded Expansion* from the 1980s where it has become increasingly dark and more brittle. As part of the Getty Conservation Institute’s 2008 two-day conference called “The Object in Transition: A Cross-Disciplinary Conference on the Preservation and Study of Modern and Contemporary Art,” a portion of *Expanded Expansion* was shipped for inclusion and it was partially installed at the Getty because it was, by this time, deemed too fragile to fully install (Fig. 16).¹¹⁶ On the left of this three-part installation, there is a re-creation of a portion of *Expanded Expansion*, in the middle is a partial installation of one original section, and to the right is another original section left for display in its storage containers.

The before-and-after comparisons displayed in the two juxtaposed images and through the three-part installation visually points to the changing material presence of *Expanded Expansion* highlighting where the original ends and the deteriorated and re-created begins. Especially evident in the three-part installation at the Getty is how the visual and spatial

¹¹⁶ The Getty Conservation Institute, “The Object in Transition,” 2008, http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/videos/object_in_transition.html.

deconstruction and reconstruction reduces the aesthetic possibilities of *Expanded Expansion* to something like a scientific study in material failure where all the pieces, original and re-created, are read as derivative of the elusive original.¹¹⁷ However, I believe that by embracing the potentialities of *weak art*, the identity of *Expanded Expansion* might also be considered in more expansive terms where its non-resemblance becomes part of the visual and textual narrative of the work. That is, can we understand the work as enlarging to take on more than its original formulation, as something always in process, indeed always *expanding*? What would rise to the surface if *Expanded Expansion* was exhibited in its current state, left horizontally in its storage boxes? I believe that its presence as material weakness would yield an unexpected aesthetic that opens a space for that which is often undervalued in the art institution: the anti-cathartic, the vulnerable, the quiet, the boring – the anti-monument.

Intentionality

And, yet, one might recognize in this hypothesis of expanded identity and the general idea that destructive forces are also creative forces, a concept emblematic of contemporary art. For example, Zoe Leonard's *Strange Fruit*, is created from organic materials including fruit skins that are intended to decompose (Fig. 17). Yet, their inability to stabilize is considered appropriate behavior because it complies with the intentions of the artist even if ultimately that intention is to behave inappropriately within the institution of the art museum. However, the

¹¹⁷ Disability Studies scholars refer to the visual rhetoric that leads to something or someone appearing as a scientific specimen, or a "freak," as *enfreakment*. The visual displays of *Expanded Expansion* arguably fall into the category of *enfreakment*. For more, see: Hevey, "The Enfreakment of Photography," 444; Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, 59; Martin F. Norden, *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 1.

material failure that accompanies Eva Hesse's *weak art* is not about planned destruction or subverting the materiality of the art object itself, but specifically about the ways in which material non-compliance is a form of destructive plasticity that prompts us to reevaluate how ableism impacts the storage, interpretation, and display of *weak art*. In the case of Hesse, ableism rises to the surface because of a conflict over intentionality as it relates to Hesse's fatal brain tumor. Hesse's intentions for the longevity of her works are conflicted and because of her disability, and perhaps also because she was a young woman, are more contested. Therefore, the conflict over the conservation of work like *Expanded Expansion* is rooted in its non-compliance because ultimately the parameters for what Hesse intended – that is what would constitute appropriate behavior on the part of the artwork – those parameters were never set, or as a result of her disability, they are not trusted.

For art conservators and curators, artistic intentionality, as difficult and perhaps controversial as that is to locate or define, still remains the barometer for how to display, conserve, and store art. It is common practice now for museum professionals to take extensive notes, record interviews with the artist, and draw up legal documents while the artist is still living in order to capture, to the best of their ability, the artist's intentions for their work and their directives for how that work is to be maintained, conserved, and displayed after their death.¹¹⁸ In the case of Eva Hesse, intentionality is first troubled by the fact that her written and recorded views on the subject are not definitive. She says different things at different times. For example,

¹¹⁸ Salvador Muñoz Viñas, *Contemporary Theory of Conservation* (Oxford; Burlington, MA: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann, 2005); Saaze, *Installation Art and the Museum*; Szmelter, *Innovative Approaches to the Complex Care of Contemporary Art*; Hummelen and Sillé, *Modern Art - Who Cares?*

in response to the Cindy Nemser's prompt "But you are concerned with the idea of lasting?"

Hesse responded:

Well, I am confused about that as I am about life. ... At this point I feel a little guilty when people want to buy it. I think they know but I want to write them a letter and say it's not going to last. I am not sure what my stand on lasting really is. Part of me feels that it's superfluous and if I need to use rubber that is more important. Life doesn't last; art doesn't last. It doesn't matter.¹¹⁹

But, when Hesse does seem to express a less ambiguous position regarding the longevity of her works, her intention is called into question on the basis of her fatal brain tumor. Intentionality in art, as in law, relies on an elusive understanding of the fitness of the mind. Which is to say that a person who is deemed non-compos mentis is not responsible for their actions. While Hesse was never medically or legally diagnosed as non-compos mentis, the stigma surrounding cognitive diseases like those associated with brain tumors, often result in a social diagnosis of non-compos mentis. In the case of Hesse, her fatal brain tumor becomes the questionable event that throws doubt across whether her stated objectives are credible, making the reliance on her intentions, and thus how to conserve her work, all that more complicated.

For example, Bill Barrette, artist and former studio assistant for Hesse explains, in direct response to the Nemser interview: "The Nemser interview was done a short period of time before she died. So we have to frame her comments in the interview as coming from somebody who is really quite ill, and is aware that death is not far away."¹²⁰ Barrette then later contends that, "...her work is not about having it degrade. I think she was not totally informed about the consequences of her actions. She said, 'Yes, I don't care,' but that response was mitigated by

¹¹⁹ Cindy Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with 12 Women Artists* (New York: Scribner, 1975), 218.

¹²⁰ Temkin and Sussman, "Uncertain Mandate: A Roundtable Discussion on Conservation Issues," 295.

what was going on in her life....” [And, here when Barrette says “what was going on in her life” he is referring to her brain tumor].¹²¹ Barrette argues here and later with some assuredness that Hesse’s recorded and remembered desires for ephemeral art are the product of a mind that is betrayed by disease and impending death. Barrette uses her disability to displace Hesse from her own narrative: to suggest that the real Hesse was no longer there at the end of her life just as the real *Expanded Expansion* is no longer here. Arguably, Barrette displaces his unwanted reminder or remainder of Hesse post-brain tumor because it does not cohere with Barrette’s remembered imaginary of Hesse pre-tumor. And yet, Barrette then resurrects his unwanted remainder of the sick and hospitalized artist as the evidence to then shore up and enshrine his fantasy of her, and her art, as presumably able-bodied and healthy. Barrette demonstrates a mode of avoidance and erasure of a disabled Hesse that maps onto the ways that scholars account for her degrading and disintegrating art. Which is to say that the ableism that casts doubt on Hesse’s intentional capacities also prevents accepting the destructive plasticity of her artwork.

The Care of Eva Hesse

I present this roundtable discussion, and specifically Barrette’s part in it to diagram how ableist assumptions about the weakness of material, both as art material and the very structure of our brains, informs the ways that Hesse’s works are interpreted, displayed, and conserved. But what if we take destructive plasticity as a kind of sculptor? As a key thought experiment to instigate structural change, what sort of art museum practice would it take, what kind of art museum would it need to be or what would the art museum become, were we to take Hesse at not just her word but also the degrading forms she’s given us? What would it take to not only

¹²¹ Temkin and Sussman, 295.

accept weakness but desire it in both Hesse's art and life? What happens to the ways in which we interpret, display, and conserve her work and what are the larger pedagogical shifts that can occur specifically in the art museum?

Or, to ask this another way, what can *weak art* do, or un-do, in the museum? I argue that one possible direction instead of solely focusing on the scientific components of what should or should not be conserved and the juxtaposition of original art against aged, deteriorating, or replicated art, is to embrace both Hesse's disability and her *weak art* as crip objects that contribute new aesthetic standards to the museum. Hesse and her *weak art* serve as essential critiques of the capitalist system that enshrines art and artist as financial commodity and art object in terms of a eugenic "survival of the fittest." *Expanded Expansion* is an example of the subversive crip and queer tactics of anti-capitalist refusal where failure to be a productive member of the art collection is a style, a practice, and a method for forwarding a crip refusal to comply with the standards of museum quality.¹²² The non-compliance of Eva Hesse's *weak art* presents a profound un-doing, an unproductive deterioration; it is a resistance to show up as subject or fixed identity. The natural forces of the world that are allowed to weigh down upon *Expanded Expansion* might be considered by The American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works (AIC), to use one of Eva Hesse's most favorite aesthetic descriptors, absurd.¹²³ The AIC, the major organization for conservators working in the United States, believes (with a rather nationalistic rhetoric) that the purpose of conservation is indeed to fight against such passivity in order to preserve objects for future generations:

¹²² The conceptualization for failure as a tactic of radical, queer politics comes directly from Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹²³ Kirsten Swenson, *Irrational Judgments: Eva Hesse, Sol Lewitt, and the 1960s* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 9.

Every day, the vision of artists, the identity of peoples, and the very existence of history all threaten to disappear. Left alone, old buildings will crumble. The Declaration of Independence will disintegrate. The photographed faces of battle-weary Civil War soldiers will fade away... By melding art with science, conservation professionals protect our heritage, preserve our legacy, and ultimately, save our treasures for generations to come. Future generations should not be deprived of knowing and understanding their history, because priceless artifacts were allowed to fall into disrepair.¹²⁴

However, unlike the goals of the AIC, Eva Hesse's *weak art* is not here to shore up a fantasy of nationalism or to stabilize history but through radical passivity instead challenges the eugenic logic that recognizes viable and valuable artwork as compliant, stable, and productive. *Weak art* cripples the art museum by rejecting ability-based logic and creates inclusivity for expanded forms of existence.¹²⁵ And, yet, *weak art* is not a category for the deteriorating art of Eva Hesse alone because the fact is that art objects fail all the time, but like the exceptionalist logic that positions disability as extraordinary, rare, and outside the realm of humanity, so too the failed art object is treated as a unique case study.

Conclusion: *Destructive Plasticity & the as if*

By taking up Catharine Malabou's understanding of destructive plasticity as one of the defining features of what constitutes *weak art*, I am also enfolding her argument for plasticity as opposed to elasticity.¹²⁶ Elasticity being a concept where, like a rubber band, a mind, an identity, or a work of art can stretch under the pressure of trauma, disease, or deterioration but then

¹²⁴ The American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works (AIC): About Conservation," n.d., <http://www.conservation-us.org/about-conservation#.VpbKwMr5hE5>.

¹²⁵ The argument for rejecting ability-based logic and embracing radical passivity as a disability tactic comes directly from Eunjung Kim. See: Kim, "Why Do Dolls Die? The Power of Passivity and the Embodied Interplay Between Disability and Sex Dolls"; Kim, "Unbecoming Human: An Ethics of Objects."

¹²⁶ Catherine Malabou, "Plasticity and Elasticity in Freud's Beyond the Pleasure Principle," *Diacritics* 37, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 77–84.

through talk therapy, medication, or conservation practice somehow return to its original shape. But, elasticity, or the ability to return to the “before” entirely, is a false illusion. And, yet, even in its impossibility, it continues to infiltrate a culture fixated on the ideology of cure where the myth of an original self, being, or object is treasured at the expense of new forms of life, and perhaps also the un-form of death. Instead, plasticity allows for a recognition that there is no true over-coming narrative, there is no real cure; we will never be who we were, for better or worse, because we bend and stretch anew again and again. Or, in the case of destructive plasticity in Eva Hesse’s *weak art*, it is a matter of not bending and stretching but of contracting, becoming brittle, less flexible, and weak. But this destruction and move toward weakness does not have to be contextualized as the tragic end whereby conservation science steps in to save the work. Nor does the work have to be marked dead. Although, Gioia Timpanelli, a friend of Hesse, does both in reference to the heavily degraded sculpture *Sans III*: “Hesse was not an artist about degradation... *Sans III*, to me, is not alive. It is not a work of art any longer, and I don’t think it would be right to show it” (Fig. 18).¹²⁷

This is, however, not to say that tragedy and mourning don’t matter, quite the opposite. To witness something that you love slowly fall apart or become unrecognizable, whether it is an artwork or your mother, is not without extraordinary grief and suffering. However, to react to it as something that either needs to be cured (especially when that is an impossibility) or to be killed (as Timpanelli suggests), is itself a form of erasure that avoids the difficulty as it refuses to find the new form desirable, acceptable, or even a reality. We might consider this desire for the death of *Sans III* on one side, or the propensity to rehabilitate *Expanded Expansion* through

¹²⁷ Temkin and Sussman, “Uncertain Mandate: A Roundtable Discussion on Conservation Issues,” 295.

conservation and replication on the other, as akin to what disability studies scholars write about, borrowing from the already existing terms of the medical community, as the “kill or cure” model.¹²⁸ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson refers to the application of this model to disability as the “cultural logic of euthanasia” where “if curing is not an apparent option, then dying is a tenable choice.”¹²⁹ The dichotomy of kill or cure is so ingrained in our mode of understanding disability, and I would extend this to all unruly bodies and minds, it is difficult to find a situation where treatments and representations of disability do not rehearse this model again and again. However, the role of *weak art* in the art institution is one place where perhaps we can begin the radical work of crippling the museum beyond this dichotomy of kill or cure, and instead *to expand*.

It is also the case that *Expanded Expansion*, which can indeed no longer expand but only contract, is not aware of its previous state of being. The tragedy that is impressed on it is done from the outside. That is, the valuation of deterioration is created by the art institution. Negated in this approach is the ability to envision the new form as having its own agency, purpose, and identity even if that comes in the shape of a radical passivity and slow dissolution. And, this may be where empathy does us a disservice. Just because it’s hard for some to witness the artwork and the artist grow weaker, doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s hard for the artwork or for the artist. And, perhaps this is where Jill Casid’s *Handle with Care* is so important as she calls us to “... practice the tough labor of learning to attend to and find ways to support not the empathy of ‘I know how you feel’ but, rather, the ‘as if,’ the necessary subjunctive that subtends an ethics of

¹²⁸ Oxford English Dictionary, “Kill, v. 7e,” in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, June 2017), <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/103361>. “Kill or cure, with reference to medical treatment or remedies, which either cure or prove fatal.”

¹²⁹ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “The Cultural Logic of Euthanasia: ‘Sad Fancyings’ in Herman Melville’s ‘Bartleby,’” *American Literature* 76, no. 4 (2004): 779.

care across the gap of empathy.”¹³⁰ I believe what Casid asks is for our ability to care, and to care for, someone, and in the case of this paper, Eva Hesse and *Expanded Expansion*, without collapsing the ethical distance between oneself and another. It is the ability to care for Eva Hesse and *Expanded Expansion* without even going as far as to revalue Hesse’s brain tumor or *Expanded Expansion*’s weakness into our dominant framework of desire and desirability because as Casid also suggests, desirability imposes its own tyranny. Desirability and value as we know them are irrevocably tied to a eugenic ideology that to reference the title of Eunjung Kim’s book, imposes its own *Curative Violence*.¹³¹

The presence of works such as *Expanded Expansion* within art museum collections, compel us to reckon with the ableist standards for “museum quality” that anchor value to claims of stability and longevity. *Weak art* invites a new conversation about disability in the art museum, a conversation that embraces access as a matter of altering the deeply embedded ableism that structures the very fibers of art objects. I believe the *weak art* of Eva Hesse creates space to *work the weakness in the norm* by embracing weakness as weakness instead of the obligatory avoidance, displacement, and erasure of it into a compulsory agenda of desire and value. In other words, it is not necessary to reframe weakness as strength in order to justify its aesthetic import, its care, and its theoretical possibilities. Weakness, fragility, and impending death are their own set of concerns that play a profound if not unseen role in shaping the modern art institution.

¹³⁰ Jill H. Casid, “Handle with Care,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 56, no. 4 (2012): 123.

¹³¹ Eunjung Kim, *Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea* (Durham London: Duke University Press, 2017).

Chapter 2 Figures

Figure 13. Eva Hesse, *Expanded Expansion*, 1969, fiberglass, polyester resin, latex, and cheesecloth, 10 feet 2 inches x 25 feet (309.9 x 762 cm) overall. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York Gift, Family of Eva Hesse, 1975. 75.2138 © Eva Hesse



Figure 14. Eva Hesse, *Expanded Expansion*, 1969, [Photograph from the 1980s], fiberglass, polyester resin, latex, and cheesecloth, 10 ft. 2 in. x 25 ft. (309.9 x 762 cm) overall. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York Gift, Family of Eva Hesse, 1975. 75.2138 © Eva Hesse



Figure15. Left: John Pass and John Stow, *The Liberty Bell*, 1753 Right: David Hammons performing *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, 1983.



Figure 16. Eva Hesse, *Expanded Expansion*, 1969. Installation view, J. Paul Getty Museum, 2008. From left: Exhibition copy of a section of the work, 2007; original left section; and original central section in storage crate.

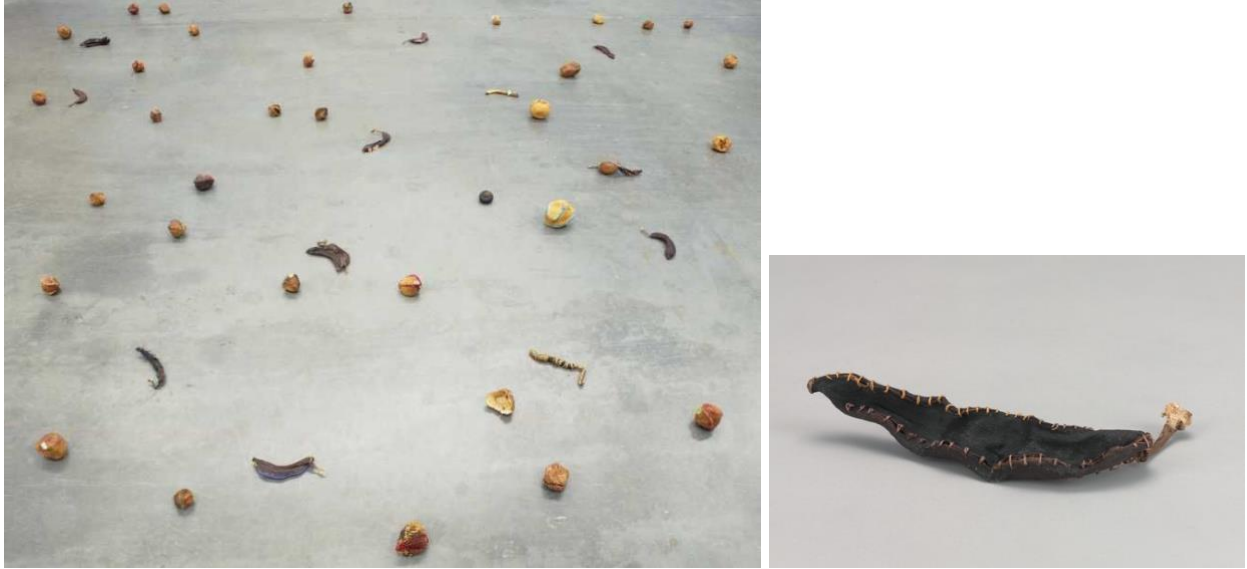


Figure 17. Zoe Leonard, *Strange Fruit (for David)*, (detail), 1992-1997 Orange, banana, grapefruit, lemon, and avocado peels with thread, zippers, buttons, sinew, needles, plastic, wire, stickers, fabric, and trim wax.

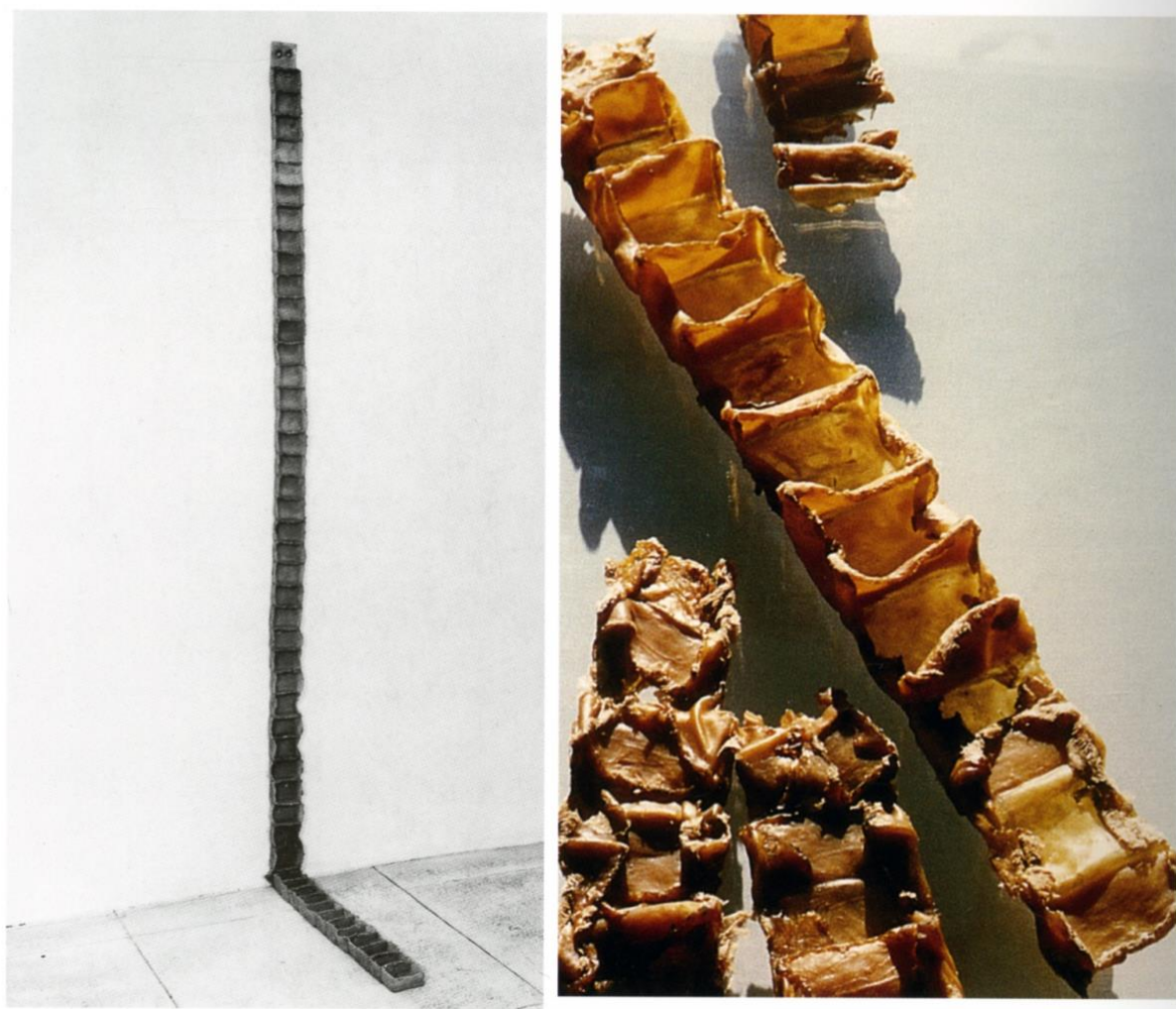


Figure 18. Eva Hesse, *Sans III*, 1969. Latex and metal grommets, 156 x 3 x 2 in. (396.2 x 7.6 x 5.1 cm). The Estate of Eva Hesse. Courtesy Galerie Hauser & Wirth, Zurich. Left: the work newly completed; right: detail of the work in 2000.

Chapter 3

Aspirational Access (at The Barnes Foundation): Dreaming Spaces of Belonging

Abstract

This chapter focuses on The Barnes Foundation, its original deteriorating building, and the role that disability played in narratives regarding modifications to that building. Specifically, I'll consider how one of the galleries (the so-called "Dutch Room") at the original Merion location was dismantled in order to build an elevator. In recent years, the removal of this gallery to make room for an elevator was linked to legal requirements to comply with the A.D.A. Yet, based on my research, it was not a legal requirement but a voluntary choice made by the museum's board in the mid-1990s. The subsequent construction of this narrative positions the A.D.A. as a damaging force and disability as a threat to the very structure of the institution. I will argue against the presumption that A.D.A. compliance is destructive to art institutions and instead lay out new protocols that center structural changes as a mode of radical care both for the physical building, the art it houses, and the bodies that occupy it. This radical care aligns with what Mia Mingus calls access intimacy, or the profound recognition between people (and institutions and art objects) that access is not a side project but pivotal to the very existence of a building, a work of art, and disabled people. *Aspirational Access* asks what would happen if instead of positioning disability accommodation within the museum as inherently destructive – altering historic buildings and the cost of doing so – accessibility was approached from a place of deep and radical care that embraced the material precarity of the structure of the institution, the material precarity of the art objects within them, and the diverse embodiment of the bodies that move in and out of these spaces?

Feminist theorist Kavitha Koshy wrote "I dream of more inclusive spaces."¹³² A call to dream because as Gloria Anzaldúa notes "nothing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads."¹³³ So, to dream of more inclusive spaces is also a practice of dreaming of more accessible spaces and to dream of more accessible spaces means to take the future possibilities of the lives of objects, of the built environment, and of disabled people

¹³² Kavitha Koshy, "Feels Like 'Carving Bone': (Re)Creating the Activist-Self, (Re)Articulating Transnational Journeys, While Sifting through Anzaldúan Thought," in *Bridging: How Gloria Anzaldúa's Life and Work Transformed Our Own*, ed. AnaLouise Keating and Gloria González-López (University of Texas Press., 2012), 203.

¹³³ Gloria Anzaldúa, "LA CONCIENCIA DE LA MESTIZA towards a New Consciousness (1987)," in *Feminisms Redux: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 310.

seriously. This dreaming is what allows for a *crip futurity* where disability is desired. It is a dream of a crip future that produces "...spaces in which desiring disability is no longer counterintuitive and in which disability is not simply tolerated or incorporated into already constituted (able-bodied) spaces."¹³⁴ The future for disabled people is often foreclosed not just because of the very real scarcity of support structures for living (health care, housing, and education) but directly, on the street by strangers who, as Alison Kafer writes, "...apparently see into my immediate future, forecasting an inability to perform...they imagine a future that is both banal and pathetic...a future of relentless pain, isolation, and bitterness, a representation that leads them to bless me, pity me, or refuse to see me altogether."¹³⁵ So, the call "to dream of more inclusive spaces," which is the epigraph that Kafer also uses in her Introduction to *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, is important to repeat here and to repeat often because dreaming is indeed the very real apparatus used to sustain, value, and desire the crip lives of objects, buildings, and bodies.

In opening up the question of access in museums and cultural institutions after the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), this dreaming hits the hard realities of architecture and infrastructure without diminishing the power of dreaming. To take up this necessarily broad question of access dreaming that implicates all art institutions, I turn to focus on an anomalous one, the notorious Barnes Foundation established in 1922 by Albert C. Barnes as a case study. The Barnes Foundation was created as a teaching and learning collection and school open to students of diverse races and classes, because Barnes believed that "...art—like people—should not be segregated."¹³⁶ Barnes believed in the accessibility of art. I use the word "accessibility" with intention here to highlight his desire to democratize art so that it could reach

¹³⁴ McRuer and Wilkerson, "Desiring Disability: Queer Theory Meets Disability Studies," 13.

¹³⁵ Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 2.

¹³⁶ The Barnes Foundation, "Our History," n.d., <https://www.barnesfoundation.org/about>.

all people, most importantly those pushed to the margins of society, which I believe for Barnes, would have included those with disabilities.

The fortune that Barnes used to acquire his prestigious art collection grew out of his first career in pharmacology where he created and patented Argyrol, an antimicrobial drug to treat ophthalmic infections, and a drug that many states required by law to be administered to all infants.¹³⁷ However, Barnes' connection to disability and medical treatment remains mostly noted only as biographical fact without deep exploration and certainly without a disability studies analysis.¹³⁸ And, yet, it is Barnes' beginnings in medicine, as creator and marketer of an antimicrobial drug that prevented a myriad of disabling diseases of the eye, including blindness, that makes the Barnes Foundation and its engagement with accessibility a particularly compelling case study through which to dream.

My focus is on the Barnes Foundation; its original building in Merion, Pennsylvania; and the role that disability played in narratives regarding infrastructural modifications to that building. Specifically, I'll consider how one of the galleries (the so-called "Dutch Room") at the original Merion location was removed in 1994 in order to build an elevator; a structural modification that was later, in the 2015 exhibition titled *The Order of Things*, presumed to have been an alteration made not by choice but by legal force in order to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. However, based on my research, there is no indication that the elevator was installed to meet the legal requirements set forth by the ADA, but that it was instead

¹³⁷ Arthur Williams, "Alfred Barnes, Argyrol and Art," *The Pharmaceutical Journal* 265, no. 7128 (December 23, 2000): 933–34.

¹³⁸ Fill in this citation once I can get back into the library and ILL so I can point to said biographies/books that discuss Barnes and race... Neil L. Rudenstine, *The House of Barnes: The Man, the Collection, the Controversy*, Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society Held at Philadelphia for Promoting Useful Knowledge, volume 266 (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2012).

a choice made to accommodate disabled and aging visitors as well as staff. I will argue that the presumption that the implementation of accommodations are only ever the result of legal compliance, positions the ADA – the landmark civil rights legislation that prohibits discrimination based on disability – as a kind of damaging force where disability accommodation is assumed to be a threat to the very structure of the institution by altering its ostensibly original form. This ableist discourse that envisions architectural form as whole and unchanging, locates disability as a destructive force compelled from the outside. Disability is imagined as both cause and effect of damaging change; it is the catalyst to create an accommodation which is then blamed for that same accommodation. By extension, it also assumes that disability support structures or infrastructures would not already be part of architecture such that basic accommodation adjustments such as the installation of an elevator would be not only necessary but also already integral. Instead, changing accommodations would only intrude from the outside as the compelling force of legal compliance rather than as structurally integral to the anti-segregationist architectures of inclusivity and welcome to support the lives of disabled people.

The ADA as damaging force (in the case of the Barnes Foundation actually damaging the physical structure of the building by incorporating an elevator) rests on the assumption that the building has, or had, an ideal form to damage in the first place. In the ableist model of architecture, the building's value rests in its ostensibly original form, a fantasy of a kind of pure structure that is timeless and unchanging and where care for the building supersedes care for the people that occupy it such that the latter should not impinge on the former. And yet, we know that the calculation, which we could imagine as, *the environment + time = structural change* is always and ever tearing down the fantasy of any notion of an original form. My surmised equation is particularly true of the Barnes' original building in Merion and was one of the

reasons the Barnes was eventually relocated to a new building in the heart of Philadelphia. For example, in a 1990 report prepared for the Board of Trustees of the Barnes Foundation by H2L2 Architects/Planners/Interior Designers, they note that the influences of environmental factors in addition to the age of the building are apparent in "...the warping of the painting's surfaces due to an obsolete dehumidification system or hidden in the walls as the rain water conductors are except when, after seventy years, they crack and begin to drip above a Matisse."¹³⁹ And thus, structural change must be made or they risk further damage to the building and the art collection itself. Therefore, structural change is always already occurring. However, and this brings us to another and more critical point for this chapter, when change is made, especially in the case of creating access and accommodations, the ideal change is one that is imperceptible. In other words, inclusion should be unseen and unfelt. Disability is to fold into an already existing structure where it is tolerated, but somehow does not necessitate demonstrable changes to physical and intellectual structures. But, this chapter asks, what if we created spaces that reflected a future where disability is desired and so desired that demonstrable changes were made, felt, and welcomed?

These demonstrable changes in the form of access and accommodation are a mode of radical care for the physical building, the art it houses, and the bodies that occupy it. While this chapter might seem to be only about whether or not the Barnes Foundation installed an elevator to meet the ADA's requirement for "reasonable accommodation" that mandated structural adjustments to add an elevator, I am in fact asking us to dream in excess of accommodation and think in the wider sphere of access as radical care. This radical care, what I'm thinking of as

¹³⁹ William P. Lull, "Conservation Environment Consultation and Suggested Program for Conservation Environment Renovation. H2L2 Project No. 1966.00," October 9, 1990, 1, Barnes Foundation Archives.

aspirational access, builds on what Mia Mingus calls *access intimacy*, or the profound recognition between people (and, I might add, between institutions and art objects) that access is not a side project, nor a legal exercise, it is something beyond basic accommodations themselves; it is a feeling: “Access intimacy is that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else ‘gets’ your access needs. The kind of eerie comfort that your disabled self feels with someone on a purely access level.”¹⁴⁰ And so, by dreaming of the Barnes Foundation in terms of *aspirational access* I want to advocate for spaces where those who enter feel the intimacy of understanding the needs of bodyminds, of “getting it,” that Mingus describes. My choice of the word *aspirational* grows from its etymological root, the Latin *aspīrāre, adspīrāre*, which means to breathe upon, to seek to reach. It later took on the religious tone which included that act of breathing into, that is giving life to, “to breathe desire towards.”¹⁴¹ Aspirational access is this desiring push of breath toward new forms of life. It is that future horizon that we strive toward and yet never comes, which is also to say that we will always be aspiring, pushing breath toward that intimate feeling of belonging that indeed must never come for our needs will always change and new breath always needed.¹⁴²

Barnes: A Crip Story

A crip look at the history of The Barnes Foundation itself challenges that flat temporality where first comes whole wellness (the ostensibly original and ideal form) and then disability and its accommodation (the destructive threat imposed from the outside.) While many may know

¹⁴⁰ Mingus, “Access Intimacy: The Missing Link.”

¹⁴¹ “Aspire, v.,” in *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford University Press, n.d.), <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/view/Entry/11677?>

¹⁴² Fill in this citation with those who discuss the utopian future via crip and queer theory... José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Sexual Cultures (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

something of the story and controversies surrounding Dr. Albert C. Barnes and his Foundation, to revisit this history from a crip vantage recasts its origins. Being attuned to the way disability shapes the lives and, thus the histories, beyond those whom we have recognized or claimed as disabled themselves, is itself pertinent to the story of disability. The story of the origins of the Barnes fortune is inextricable from the history of disability.

In 1864, Barnes' father, John J. Barnes enlisted to fight for the Union army in the American Civil War in the 82nd Infantry Regiment of Pennsylvania. In his first year, his regiment fought in the battle of Cold Harbor, Virginia, where 7,000 Union men were lost in less than thirty minutes and it was noted that "the dead covered more than five acres of ground about as thickly as they could be laid."¹⁴³ Army medics searched through the carnage for life and found John J. Barnes wounded but alive. John had sustained gunshots to his right arm and, as was consistent with army medicine at the time, his right arm was amputated above the elbow.¹⁴⁴ As was also consistent with medical care at a time before the use of antiseptic practices in the United States (that would happen in the 1880s), infection set in and John spent the next year in army hospitals before receiving an honorable discharge on June 26, 1865 with a disability pension of eight dollars a month.¹⁴⁵ John also received a prosthetic arm. However, as was true of many prosthetics at the time, it was difficult to wear and so he quickly abandoned it.

The fact that Albert Barnes' father lost his arm during the American Civil War is significant not only because of the obvious connection to disability but because it also opens up

¹⁴³ Mary Ann Meyers, *Art, Education, & African-American Culture: Albert Barnes and the Science of Philanthropy* (New Brunswick [N.J.]: Routledge (reprint from Transaction Publishers), 2017), 4.

¹⁴⁴ Meyers, 4.

¹⁴⁵ William Schack, *Art and Argyrol: The Life and Career of Dr. Albert C. Barnes*, Kindle edition (Thomas Yoseloff; First Edition edition (1960), 1960), chap. Obituary and Beginning.

the broader conversation regarding the origins of our modern understanding of disability as a legal and cultural construct in the United States. While some scholars root the modern construction of disability in the United States in the early twentieth century, specifically after the First World War, there is significant evidence that this formation really came into modern parlance with the American Civil War, which introduced the pension system for wounded veterans, in addition to the rise of the artificial limb industry. David Yuan argues, “the Civil War and Reconstruction not only redefined war but also helped to redefine disability for the modern state. . . . rehabilitation and reassimilation [became] critical components of a new paradigm for the treatment of the disabled.”¹⁴⁶ It is during and in the years after the American Civil War that the body, specifically the rehabilitation of the disabled body, became a space to harvest a belief in the physical, military, and economic superiority of the United States. In other words, and as Yuan elaborates, following the American Civil War there was “a nationalist body aesthetics whose implications went well beyond the practical task of rehabilitating disabled workers. . . . but also that his or her body – like the bodies of all citizens – properly emblemized the body politic. . . . the disabled body was not a correct emblem for the Reconstructed United States.”¹⁴⁷ Albert Barnes, born in Philadelphia in 1872, only three years before Thomas Eakins painted his infamous *The Gross Clinic*, came into a world where disability was emerging as a complicated legal and cultural issue.¹⁴⁸ Barnes, who was born into severe poverty, growing up in what was called “The Neck” of Philadelphia, was also more likely to experience the proliferation of

¹⁴⁶ David D. Yuan, “Disfigurement and Reconstruction in Oliver Wendell Holmes’s ‘The Human Wheel, Its Spokes and Felloes,’” in *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability*, ed. David Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *The Body, in Theory: Histories of Cultural Materialism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 71–72.

¹⁴⁷ Yuan, 71.

¹⁴⁸ Cooley, “An Inartistic Interest: Civil War Medicine, Disability, and the Art of Thomas Eakins.”

disability due not only to the ravages of the American Civil War but the surge in work-related disabilities and occupational diseases from crowded, unsanitary, and dangerous industrialized workplaces.

Although Barnes' early life was spent in poverty, by his teenage years he was able to enroll in high school at a time when education was not compulsory nor child labor prohibited, and against these odds, he graduated in 1889.¹⁴⁹ Barnes then enrolled in a three-year medical program at the University of Pennsylvania. William Schack, author of *Art and Argyrol: The Life and Career of Dr. Albert C. Barnes* speculated that Barnes' choice to go into medicine may have been the result of two entwined factors. First, doctors were highly sought after and it would provide him with a stable living. Second, "... with the example of his father always before him, he may have felt a sympathy for the disabled and a desire to help them."¹⁵⁰ Schack goes on to explain that the reason Barnes, after completing medical school, chose to spend one year interning at Pennsylvania's State Hospital for the Insane was because: "if he was moved to become a doctor by the plight of the disabled, he could have been especially drawn to mental derangement, the most pathetic of disabilities."¹⁵¹ I quote Schack here because there are very few sources available that discuss this particular part of Barnes' life, and also to highlight the way in which histories of ableism track across multiple generations of scholarship. I believe a more reasonable, and certainly less ableist, explanation for Barnes' choice to intern at Pennsylvania's State Hospital for the Insane was because of his life-long interest in psychology, which is something that he pursued here as a young doctor and then continued studying throughout both

¹⁴⁹ Schack, *Art and Argyrol: The Life and Career of Dr. Albert C. Barnes*, chaps. 1 and 2.

¹⁵⁰ Schack, chap. 2.

¹⁵¹ Schack, chap. 2.

his pharmacological career and his most famous role as founder, collector, and educator for the Barnes Foundation.

There is scant discussion or research about Barnes' year of work at the Pennsylvania State Hospital for the Insane in 1893. In fact, I've only located mentions of it in a handful of places, one of which was in the *Annual Report of the Trustees of the State Hospital for the Insane*. In the 1894 report Albert C. Barnes, M.D. is listed as an Assistant Physician where it was noted that "Dr. Albert C. Barnes has for several months discharged the duties of Assistant Physician in the male Wards with carefulness and strict attention."¹⁵² Barnes' work at the State Hospital for the Insane is also mentioned in Carl W. McCardle's 1942, four-part expose on Barnes published by the Saturday Evening Post, titled "The Terrible-Tempered Dr. Barnes." In the debut issue, McCardle mentions, with what I assume might be a bit of artistic license, that:

After he got his M.D. from Penn in 1892, Barnes, who never has practiced medicine, was resident physician for a year at an insane asylum upstate, so he could study abnormal psychology. There he picked up spending money by applying normal psychology to crapshooting with the interns, who, until then, didn't know that dice cared one way or another about psychology. He was influential in getting a law passed recognizing insanity in certain borderline cases.¹⁵³

Crapshooting aside, McCardle's expose is the only reference to Barnes' involvement in helping to pass a law to recognize "insanity in certain borderline cases." After research into historical law records, I am still unsure of the law that McCardle references or Barnes' role in passing it. Nevertheless, Barnes' work at the Pennsylvania State Hospital for the Insane in 1893 was only the beginning of his sustained interest in mental illness and psychology. The fact that the

¹⁵² Trustees of the State Hospital for the Insane, "Annual Report of the Trustees of the State Hospital for the Insane at Warren, Penn'a., for the Year Ending November 30, 1893, to the Board of Commissioners of Public Charities.," Annual Report (Warren, PA. E. Cowan & Co., Printers: STATE HOSPITAL FOR THE INSANE, WARREN, PA., 1894), 2 and 10.

¹⁵³ Carl W. McCardle, "The Terrible-Tempered Dr. Barnes," *The Saturday Evening Post*, March 21, 1942, 96.

descriptor of “insanity” would later attach to Barnes as a collector, an educator, and as a man whose biographies often sensationalized his less-than-easygoing personality into monstrous proportions, is significant. While the art he collected would be labelled by his contemporaries as work created by the insane, it is also true that Henri Matisse wrote that the Barnes Foundation was “the only sane place” for the display of art that he’d seen in the United States.¹⁵⁴ This discourse around mental illness plays an important role in thinking about Barnes and his collection from a disability studies perspective.

One of Barnes’ biographers, Henry Hart, recalled asking Barnes why he didn’t stay on longer at The Pennsylvania State Hospital for the Insane, to which Barnes replied that he left to further his education in Europe because he was a “chance-taker,” a person who “...knows that chance, not permanence, is the fundamental fact of the universe...it’s struggle, not acceptance, that makes life worth living.”¹⁵⁵ There is some irony in Barnes’ understanding that change is inevitable as Barnes, after his death, would legally require the installation of his art collection to be permanent, “...to be closed, and thereafter no change therein shall be made...”¹⁵⁶ But, the point that I believe Hart was trying to convey is that Barnes’ departure from the Pennsylvania State Hospital for the Insane was not the result of disappointment with his post, but rather a desire for new challenges that would result in his continued education in Europe. But, his year at the Hospital for the Insane was not forgotten, indeed, it left an indelible mark:

The patients at Warren, he once told me, revealed to him how wrong beliefs and habits cause sane people to ‘lose their minds,’ and convinced him that the process could be reversed, and that the non-organically and non-chemically insane would

¹⁵⁴ David Carrier, *Museum Skepticism: A History of the Display of Art in Public Galleries* (Durham and London: Duke Univ. Press, 2006), 150.

¹⁵⁵ Henry Hart, *Dr. Barnes of Merion, An Appreciation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1963), 34.

¹⁵⁶ The Barnes Foundation, “Indenture and Agreement of The Barnes Foundation,” December 6, 1922, sec. 9, The Barnes Foundation Archive.

have their sanity restored if they could be led to accept valid ideas and acquire new attitudes and habits.¹⁵⁷

Barnes' conviction – that mental illness was not exclusively tied to biological differences of the body or brain (which was the prevailing opinion at the time), but instead that mental illness could be treated through various therapeutics – is significant. While it is not a new idea that Barnes was an early adaptor of what was then called the “new psychology” – the Vienna School of Sigmund Freud and its American adaptors, William James and John Dewey – what is new, I'd argue, is that Barnes came to these beliefs from his own experience working with the mentally ill. Indeed, Barnes' life experiences growing up with a father who was physically disabled in addition to his professional work with the those deemed mentally ill, shaped his approach to issues of equality and education among people whom he believed were most marginalized during his lifetime. I am in agreement with Henry Hart's later observation that Barnes' time at the Hospital for the Insane “...bred a lifelong interest in psychiatry and psychology, and also, I believe, led to the first formulation of the ideas which became the warp and woof of his personality and intellectual being.”¹⁵⁸ Thinking through Barnes' own lived experiences with disabilities matters in a demonstrable way to Barnes and his vision of the transformative power of arts education.

Barnes' interest in mental illness and psychology predated his year at the Hospital for the Insane. In a letter dated September 20, 1920, Barnes wrote to Alice Chipman Dewey (John Dewey's wife) that he began studying psychology around the age of fourteen and by sixteen Barnes declared that he knew “...most of the stuff formal psychologists were writing about and I knew the essence of Freudian theory by personal knowledge of myself and others, long before Freud had even begun to earn a living. In short, I was living by experimenting with what made

¹⁵⁷ Hart, *Dr. Barnes of Merion, An Appreciation*, 34.

¹⁵⁸ Hart, 34.

up human nature.”¹⁵⁹ Aside from the rather grandiose claim that Barnes had mastered Freudian theory before Freud had, the important takeaway is that Barnes himself acknowledges his very early interest in studying mental illness from the perspective of the “new psychology” as opposed to the biological determinism that was fashionable in Philadelphia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This conservative approach to mental illness was perhaps best exemplified by Dr. Francis Xavier Dercum and Dr. Charles W. Burr, neurologists who specialized in treating nervous and mental disorders and whom Barnes would later publicly denounce for their declaration that “Modern painters...ought to be committed to insane asylums.”¹⁶⁰ In fact, disability was directly attached to Barnes and his collection as they were considered by Dr. Dercum and Dr. Burr to be disabled by mental illness and by eye diseases that were thought to distort perceptions of color and form. Barnes and his collection represented “ghastly lesions of the mind and body which usually land people in the hospitals and in the asylums,” but also significantly to diseases of the eye representing artists who were “defective in vision and were unable to see color and form clearly.”¹⁶¹ The later accusation must have been particularly irritating for the man who made such a sweeping breakthrough in treating diseases of the eye. While the scholarship around Barnes does highlight his interest in psychology and the influence of John Dewey on his teaching philosophy, I believe an overlooked component of Barnes’ story is this life-long interest in disability while also contending with being labeled as disabled himself due to the art he collected.

¹⁵⁹ Richard J. Wattenmaker, *American Paintings and Works on Paper in the Barnes Foundation* (Merion, Pa.: New Haven: Barnes Foundation ; In association with Yale University Press, 2010), 6.

¹⁶⁰ “Alienists Rap Cubist Art,” *The Evening Bulletin - Philadelphia*, April 30, 1921; Jeremy Braddock, “Neurotic Cities: Barnes in Philadelphia,” *Art Journal* 63, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 52.

¹⁶¹ “Alienists Rap Cubist Art,” 3.

After Barnes' internship at The Pennsylvania State Hospital for the Insane, he traveled to Germany twice to continue his studies, enrolling at the University of Berlin and later at Heidelberg University. At the time, many students flocked to Berlin as it had the reputation of having the "world's greatest research chemists."¹⁶² After a year of studying clinical medicine and experimental physiology, Barnes studied what he described as "experimental therapeutics" (pharmacology) and chemistry.¹⁶³ Barnes recalls that while he was studying "...the relationship between chemical constitution and physiological activities" he "developed many new products, one of which, Argyrol, turned out to be of considerable clinical value and incidentally, the means of providing me with a lot of money."¹⁶⁴ It was with the help of German chemist Hermann Hille that Barnes was able to co-develop Argyrol in 1902.¹⁶⁵ Most Barnes scholarship notes the development of Argyrol as the basis for Barnes' wealth, couching its success in Barnes' ruthless production and marketing of the drug which included cutting his partner Hille out of the business and trademarking it for himself in 1908. Argyrol shows up most often as a factual detail, an example of the sometimes-callous business mentality that he would bring to the Barnes Foundation itself, and mostly in reference to the small workshop where Argyrol was produced and where Barnes began his first experiments in art education. However, there is little attention paid to Argyrol itself, why Barnes created it, and what it meant for preventing what today we would consider easily manageable or curable diseases.

Argyrol was a breakthrough drug when Barnes brought it to market in 1902. It was a topical, non-toxic, anti-microbial agent, before the era of antibiotics. At the time, the choice of

¹⁶² Mary Ann Meyers, "Albert C. Barnes: Chemist, Entrepreneur, Philanthropist," *Chemical Heritage* 25, no. 4 (Winter -2008 2007): 22.

¹⁶³ Meyers, 22.

¹⁶⁴ Wattenmaker, *American Paintings and Works on Paper in the Barnes Foundation*, 13.

¹⁶⁵ Wattenmaker, 13.

pharmaceuticals to treat bacterial infections were heroin, morphine, quinine, and aspirin (aspirin being only three years old at the time Barnes and Hille developed Argyrol).¹⁶⁶ Other treatments included the often toxic, painful, and not necessarily helpful application of “mercury compounds, silver salts, boric acid, flavines, chlorine-containing compounds and phenol solutions.”¹⁶⁷ For the specific treatment of eye infections like gonorrhea of the eye that would pass from mother to child during childbirth, these treatments were sometimes more dangerous than the disease itself as “the interaction of the silver ion with body tissues and physiological secretions resulted in loss of activity, tissue damage and argyria – a permanent grey staining of the conjunctiva and/or skin due to prolonged exposure to silver compounds.”¹⁶⁸ Argyrol harnessed the anti-microbial power of silver nitrates but did so by combining it with a wheat protein. This protein allowed the silver to be applied to the viscous tissues of eyes without corrosion and toxicity; and it had the added benefit of allowing the silver solution to penetrate beyond the surface tissue of the eye, thus making it a more effective medicine.¹⁶⁹ Argyrol became a widely used drug that many states required by law to be administered as drops in the eyes of all infants.

This medical breakthrough led to the large fortune upon which Barnes built his art collection and foundation, but I also find it a compelling lens through which to think about Barnes as a person concerned with creating hospitable environments for the most vulnerable. The creation of an anti-microbial that could be administered without pain and toxic side-effects took into account the feelings and care for the patient at a time when this was arguably not the greatest concern of medical practitioners. In fact, there is a significant history of the belief that pain was a

¹⁶⁶ Meyers, “Albert C. Barnes: Chemist, Entrepreneur, Philanthropist,” 22–23.

¹⁶⁷ Williams, “Alfred Barnes, Argyrol and Art,” 933.

¹⁶⁸ Williams, 933.

¹⁶⁹ Meyers, “Albert C. Barnes: Chemist, Entrepreneur, Philanthropist,” 23.

vital part of a patient's healing. The vice president for the American Medical Association proclaimed in 1849 that pain was "curative ... The actions of life are maintained by it."¹⁷⁰ Even with the increased use of ether and chloroform as anesthetics in the 1850-60s, many medical practitioners were still wary of lessening the patient's pain because of this long entrenched belief that pain was a necessary component of healing, a belief which has certainly not dissipated completely even today with the "no pain, no gain" or "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger" mantras.¹⁷¹ The doctors that did employ anesthetics did so in order to increase docility and not to create a comfortable environment for the patient as is evident from this account where patients were considered "teaching material":

...chloroform was only given exceptionally, [so] an abnormal and scientifically interesting case meant protracted agony to the patient. The students do not realise how cruel their wish was; they only yielded to a desire for increased knowledge in itself praiseworthy, and overlooked the fact that the patient was not merely what she was often called, 'teaching material' ... but a sentient, suffering, agonised, human creature.¹⁷²

The patient's suffering was a means to furthering medical knowledge, a rationale responsible for some of the most horrific experiments and treatments of people, especially those who are poor, people of color, not of Christian birth and breeding, and with mental illness and mental disabilities.¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ Joanna Bourke, *The Story of Pain: From Prayer to Painkillers*, First edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 278.

¹⁷¹ Bourke, chap. 9. Pain Relief.

¹⁷² Joanna Bourke, "Pain, Sympathy and the Medical Encounter Between the Mid Eighteenth and the Mid Twentieth Centuries: Pain, Sympathy and the Medical Encounter," *Historical Research* 85, no. 229 (August 2012): 434, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2281.2011.00593.x>.

¹⁷³ Just to name a few off the top of my head: medical experiments/torture of Nazi Germany, the Guatemala Project, J. Marion Sims experiments, the Tuskegee Study, Agent Orange experiments, Cincinnati Radiation experiments. See also: Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*, 1st ed (New York: Doubleday, 2006); Susan E Lederer, *Subjected to Science: Human Experimentation in America before the Second World War* (Baltimore; London:

Barnes' background as an intern at the Hospital for the Insane, coupled with his lifelong interest in psychology and Freudian talk therapy, would indeed make him a man sensitive to the feelings of the patient, particularly to pain that elusive and yet very real sensation in the body and the mind. While it is true that Barnes was less than hospitable to the privileged elite of Philadelphia and the art world, for those most marginalized, he was a man concerned with hospitality and creating environments of welcome, even at the molecular level. His concern for marginalized communities was at the time truly rare, a hospitality that was most famously exemplified in the way he set up his workshop to create Argyrol.

Starting in 1908, Barnes's Argyrol factory employed Black men and white women. At a time when the KKK was on the rise and films like *Birth of a Nation* were huge commercial successes, Barnes' investment in the education and well-being of his Black employees was exceptional.¹⁷⁴ Barnes, known for his progressive views on race and his life-long support of Black people, culture, and institutions, cites his workshop as the initial experiment for what would become the Barnes Foundation.¹⁷⁵ Barnes' love of African American culture and disgust for the slow progress of equality in the United States is summed up in his essay *Negro Art and America* published in Harlem Renaissance pioneer Alain Locke's *The New Negro*, Barnes wrote: "When he was the abject, down-trodden slave, he burst forth into songs which constitute America's only great music – the spirituals... The relationship of master and slave has changed but little in the sixty years of freedom. He is still a slave to the ignorance, the prejudice, the

The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Allen M. Hornblum, Judith L. Newman, and Gregory J. Dober, *Against Their Will: The Secret History of Medical Experimentation on Children in Cold War America* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

¹⁷⁴ Meyers, *Art, Education, & African-American Culture*.

¹⁷⁵ Albert C. Barnes, "The Barnes Foundation," *New Republic*, March 14, 1923, 65.

cruelty which were the fate of his forefathers.”¹⁷⁶ Yet, Barnes’ understanding of race was not uncomplicated by a deep paternalism and a racist understanding of African culture and people, exemplified in a 1926 speech that was also published in a later edition of *The New Negro* titled *Negro Art, Past and Present* where he states that African Americans were “torn from their native environment and from their carefree, irresponsible life... self-expression was found in the adaptation of their ancient heathen rites.”¹⁷⁷ Nonetheless, Barnes’ understanding of race was still progressive for his time and his support for Black people genuine, reflected in his decision to build into his employees work day paid time to pursue their educational interests. Barnes allocated two hours of every day for reading, conversation, and lessons in philosophy, psychology, and art.¹⁷⁸

Barnes’ experiment in education was “...not simply to produce better employees. It was to produce happier people, that is, people with more options and more resources, by providing his employees with something quite like a liberal education.”¹⁷⁹ I believe that some of the inspiration for Barnes’ experiment came from his tenure at the State Hospital for the Insane in Warren PA where Philippe Pinel and William Tuke’s “moral treatment” for addressing mental illness was actively practiced. The moral treatment, a rejection of the corporal punishment previously used in such hospitals, instead used the creative arts, reading, and admiring of beautiful surroundings to induce the patient into participating in their own “restoration.” I note

¹⁷⁶ Albert C. Barnes, “Negro Art and America,” in *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1925), 30.

¹⁷⁷ Albert C. Barnes, “Negro Art, Past and Present,” in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2007), 334.

¹⁷⁸ Meyers, *Art, Education, & African-American Culture*, 19; Charles H. Hollingsworth, “Port of Sanctuary: The Aesthetic of the African/African American and the Barnes Foundation,” *Art Education* 47, no. 6 (November 1994): 42.

¹⁷⁹ Meyers, *Art, Education, & African-American Culture*, 19.

that the term “restoration” used by the physicians at the State Hospital for the Insane to describe a patient who was ready to re-enter society, also carries curious correlations to the language now used to describe the conservation of art and architecture. In 1885 and 1888, the physician in chief and superintendent, John Curwen (who was also superintendent when Barnes was employed in 1893) wrote about the application of the moral treatment method in his annual report: “...the moral treatment, which means everything which can amuse, divert, instruct and lead the thoughts away from disordered to healthy action.”¹⁸⁰ Curwen explains in 1885 that

... whatever may have been the cause of insanity, mental diversions, in the manifold forms of employment and amusement, are well-recognized agencies for restoration. Much can be done in the Hospital by the attractions of music, flowers and pictures, the magic-lantern and the stage, and no doubt, also, by instruction in molding, carving, draughting, designing and needle-work. If, however, the mind could be awakened to these resources before insanity begins how much more confidently could restoration be assured! How rarely it would begin at all ...¹⁸¹

It is this last part of Curwen’s report that calls for staving off insanity before it begins through the study and practice of the creative arts that seems so similar to the regime set forth by Barnes at his Argyrol factory. Barnes’ desire to create an environment conducive to work and to supporting the well-being of his employees is what led to his burgeoning collection of art and later the establishment of his Foundation.

Barnes started collecting art for the purpose of exhibiting works on the factory walls. By the early 1920s, the Argyrol factory exhibited one-hundred art works including his favorite

¹⁸⁰ Trustees of the State Hospital for the Insane, “Annual Report of the Trustees of the State Hospital for the Insane at Warren, Penn’a., for the Year Ending November 30, 1888, to the Commity on Lunacy,” Annual Report (Warren, PA. E. Cowan & Co., Printers: STATE HOSPITAL FOR THE INSANE, WARREN, PA., 1888), 16.

¹⁸¹ Trustees of the State Hospital for the Insane, “Annual Report of the Trustees of the State Hospital for the Insane at Warren, Penn’a., for the Year Ending November 30, 1885, to the Commity on Lunacy,” Annual Report (Warren, PA. E. Cowan & Co., Printers: STATE HOSPITAL FOR THE INSANE, WARREN, PA., 1885), 8.

American artists: William Glackens, Ernest Lawson, and Maurice Prendergast.¹⁸² A few years later, Barnes officially opened his Foundation. He noted that it was the Argyrol factory that inspired it:

...the most valuable asset of the Foundation is the twenty years' experience in the working out of a community plan which is basically educational in the modern conception of that term. By that is meant education as a means of growth, of direction, of personal development cooperated in by a group of people who work for their livelihood in a corporation engaged in the manufacture of chemicals originated by themselves.¹⁸³

On December 4, 1922, the Barnes Foundation was chartered as an educational institution by the State of Pennsylvania.

With this charter, Barnes dedicated himself and his growing art collection full time to the development of a scientific approach to the education of students in art, aesthetics, and philosophy. The sales of Argyrol formed the core component of his massive wealth that allowed him to purchase a 12-acre park in Merion, PA (a suburb of Philadelphia) where he hired architect Paul Cret to design the gallery that would be the home of the Barnes Foundation collection until it was moved to a new building in Center City, Philadelphia in 2012.¹⁸⁴ Mary Mullens, who began her career working and teaching in his Argyrol factory was hired as to be the Associate Director of Education at the new Foundation. She wrote that the purpose of the Foundation "...is educational in the widest sense of the word ... conceived as the complete and harmonious development of all the capacities with which an individual is endowed at birth, a development which requires, not coercion or standardization, but guidance of the interests of every individual

¹⁸² Meyers, *Art, Education, & African-American Culture*, 24.

¹⁸³ Barnes, "The Barnes Foundation," 65.

¹⁸⁴ Mary Mullen, "The Barnes Foundation: An Experiment in Education," *The Journal of The Barnes Foundation* 1, no. 1 (April 1925): 4 and 7; The Barnes Foundation, "Our History."

towards a form that shall be uniquely characteristic of him.”¹⁸⁵ A collection intended to serve as a laboratory for Barnes’ great educational experiment that “sought to counter the prevailing elitism surrounding art and to equip ordinary men and women to grasp its profound meanings and human significance” is now one of the most important collections of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Modern art in the world.¹⁸⁶

In 1925 the main buildings of the Foundation were completed, and Barnes began installing his famous “ensembles.”¹⁸⁷ The ensembles, or his curated groupings of art, were the result of his unique installation that was dictated by formal qualities such as line, color, and light. For example, he displayed paintings by Modigliani alongside African masks and door hinges because Barnes found a resonance between their line and form thereby disrupting traditional exhibition norms which were largely organized around chronology, culture, and medium. It is on one of the ensembles, in fact an entire room of ensembles, known as “the Dutch Room” on which the rest of this chapter hinges.

Introducing the Dutch Room and Radical Care

In the 2015 exhibition titled *The Order of Things* at the new Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia, the curator, Martha Lucy, reconstructed a room, dismantled in the 1990s at the original Merion location, called the Dutch Room (Fig. 19). The room was reassembled from storage based on archival photographs and placed in a transparent plexiglass structure built to the specifications of the original room (Fig. 20). Accompanying the reconstruction was wall text

¹⁸⁵ Mullen, “The Barnes Foundation: An Experiment in Education,” 3.

¹⁸⁶ Wattenmaker, *American Paintings and Works on Paper in the Barnes Foundation*, 2.

¹⁸⁷ Edward A. Barnhart and Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates, Inc., “Proposal for The Barnes Foundation, B00668,” October 9, 1995, 3, The Barnes Foundation Archive.

(also reprinted in the exhibition catalog) explaining that the 1994 replacement of the Dutch Room with an elevator was attributed to the legal requirement to comply with the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act. The exhibition catalog states: “To accommodate the addition of an elevator in the mid-1990s (required by the passage of the American with Disability Act), [The Dutch Room] was dismantled and its contents placed in storage” (Fig. 21).¹⁸⁸ Yet, based on my research in The Barnes Foundation archive, the installation of the elevator was not a legal requirement but a voluntary choice made by the Foundation’s Board of Trustees to accommodate older patrons, ageing security guards, and the broader disabled public. This 2015 account that the dismantling of the Dutch Room was due to the A.D.A., positions this landmark civil rights legislation that prohibits discrimination based on disability, as a kind of damaging force where disability accommodation becomes a threat to the very structure of the institution. Disability is both cause and effect as it is marked as the catalyst to create an accommodation and then blamed for that same accommodation. Here, accommodation means damage as a violation of the timeless and unchanging ideal form. If accommodation is made it should be unseen and unfelt. While Barnes was dead by the time the elevator was installed, based on his history of creating places of welcome, especially for marginalized populations, I believe that he would have embraced the elevator, even if it meant displacing the Dutch Room.

I argue against the presumption that A.D.A. compliance is destructive and instead suggest that structural change is a mode of radical care both for the physical building, the art it houses, and the bodies that occupy it. This radical care aligns with what Mia Mingus calls access intimacy, or the profound recognition between people (and, I might add between institutions and

¹⁸⁸ Barnes Foundation and Martha Lucy, eds., *Mark Dion, Judy Pfaff, Fred Wilson: The Order of Things* (Philadelphia: The Barnes Foundation, 2015), 48.

art objects) that access is not a side project but pivotal to the very existence of a building, works of art, and disabled people. My call for aspirational access that builds on Mingus' work requires the kind of thinking in advance that anticipates needs, which is the foundation of real welcome. This foundational rather than additive approach represents a reorientation of practice toward always doing more than the legally mandated minimum. Creating spaces of inclusion that honor diversity requires a holistic approach that, rather than investing in permanence (which often translates to a preservation of exclusionary structures), must remain open to the work of substantial change by listening not just to those already inside the institution but also to those yet to come.

The Barnes Foundation provides a case study to model a broader argument that can be applied to a variety of institutions to ask what would happen if instead of casting disability accommodation as destructive, that is altering buildings and the cost of doing so, what if accessibility was approached from a place of radical care to embrace diverse embodiment both in terms of the structural embodiment of an art institution and of the bodies that move in and out of these spaces? The installation of an elevator at the original Barnes Foundation, an elevator that fundamentally altered the gallery layout and building structure, can serve as an example to prompt others to consider how altering space is a form of radical care, even though it has yet to be recognized as such.

To dream of elevators...

The Barnes Foundation went on to run with great success for decades. Barnes added to his collection, rearranged his ensembles, and continued teaching students, visiting artists, and scholars. In July of 1951 Barnes was involved in a fatal car crash, which set into motion one of

the most controversial elements of the foundation's Indenture.¹⁸⁹ Upon his death, Barnes specified that his collection and his ensembles be "closed" and that "all the paintings shall remain in exactly the places they are at the time of the death of Donor."¹⁹⁰ The indenture states: "At the death of Donor the collection shall be closed, and thereafter no change therein shall be made by the purchase, bequest or otherwise obtaining of additional pictures, or other works of art, or other objects of whatsoever description."¹⁹¹ This sealing off of the Barnes stipulated in paragraph nine and the provision that no paintings shall be moved, that they "remain exactly" where they are, in paragraph thirteen, formed the basis for the heated debate and legal fight over the now infamous rebuilding and move of the Barnes Foundation to the heart of Philadelphia in 2012.

The court found in 2004 that due to years of financial mismanagement and court entanglements "the Foundation's finances have reached a critical point" and because "there has not been an adequate showing the sufficient revenue cannot be generated by other means" the court ruled that the "...provision in Dr. Barnes' indenture mandating that the gallery be maintained in Merion was not sacrosanct, and could yield under the 'doctrine of deviation,' provided we were convinced the move to Philadelphia represented the least drastic modification of the indenture that would accomplish the donor's desired ends."¹⁹² The case went through

¹⁸⁹ Barbara Anne Beaucar, Chelsea Houck, and Amanda McKnight, "Early Education Records: Barnes Archive Finding Aid" (The Barnes Foundation Archives, August 2, 2017), 11, Barnes Foundation.

¹⁹⁰ The Barnes Foundation, "Indenture and Agreement of The Barnes Foundation," paras. 9 and 13.

¹⁹¹ The Barnes Foundation, paras. 9 and 13.

¹⁹² Stanley Ott, 2004 WL 2903655. *THE BARNES FOUNDATION, A Corporation*, No. 58,788 (Court of Common Pleas of Pennsylvania, Montgomery County December 13, 2004); Stanley Ott, 2004 WL 1960204. *THE BARNES FOUNDATION, A Corporation*, No. 58,788 (Court of Common Pleas of Pennsylvania, Montgomery County January 9, 2004).

multiple hearings and appeals not least because a group of former students of the Barnes and community members fought vehemently to keep the Barnes collection in its original Merion building, believing that the indenture and Barnes' wishes were clear about where the collection should be.¹⁹³ But, it was also because there was a certain kind of inconclusivity at work not in interpreting Barnes' wishes and indenture, but in establishing whether or not the indenture could be changed under the "doctrine of deviation." The modern legal use of "Doctrine of Deviation" is a "principle allowing variation from a term of a will or trust to avoid defeating the document's purpose."¹⁹⁴ I don't intend to weigh in on the court decision because, and this is the point, there is, as there usually is in law, a good deal of inconclusivity. The \$150 million financial agreement that the Barnes Foundation made with Pew Charitable Trusts and the Lenfest Foundation was "predicated upon the relocation of The Foundation's art collection from Merion to a new site to be built in Philadelphia."¹⁹⁵ In other words, Pew and Lenfest could have given that money to the current Marion location, but they did not. Therefore, (and this is the reason this legal account is pertinent to my larger argument) there is an inconclusivity at work that is side-stepped by a legal authority used to shore up a control that corresponds to a fantasy of control over the afterlife of an institution. It is a strategy for keeping the Foundation from a kind of mad errancy. It is a fantasy that erodes the potential for radical intimacy as it chafes against the forces of conservation and preservation that insist on a static and controllable institution based on a monovision dictated in advance.

¹⁹³ Don Argott, *Art of the Steal*, Documentary (IFC Films, 2009).

¹⁹⁴ "Doctrine of Deviation," in *US Legal Dictionary* (US Legal, n.d.), <https://definitions.uslegal.com/d/deviation-doctrine/>.

¹⁹⁵ Ott, 2004 WL 1960204. THE BARNES FOUNDATION, A Corporation at 2.

And, this possibility of radical intimacy brings me back to a less obvious alteration than the complete rebuilding of the Barnes in Philadelphia – the installation of an elevator in 1994. Curiously, almost no one (inside or outside the Barnes Foundation) is aware, or remembers, that an entire gallery, “The Dutch Room,” was eliminated to make room for an elevator. This erasure seems to have even extended to the archives of the Barnes Foundation. I spent three days there, combing through their archive and interviewing archivists and curators, to come away with scant evidence that the Dutch Room ever really existed. In other words, when I asked the archivists and curators about the Dutch Room, they could provide me with some archival photos of its existence but no documentation about why it was removed except for the assumption that it was the result of ADA compliance. And, I say assumption because, again, they held no records on this room except for those few archival photos.

When I interviewed Barnes curator Martha Lucy regarding how she researched and installed the Dutch Room in a transparent acrylic box for the 2015 exhibition at the new Barnes, she conveyed to me that the only materials she had were these same archival photographs in addition to the objects themselves that were in storage.¹⁹⁶ When I asked why she wrote that ADA compliance was responsible for the removal of the Dutch Room, she responded that it was an assumption. She then suggested that I ask longtime archivist Barbara Beucar, or, if I really want to find out, to get in touch with Richard H. Glanton, President of the Barnes Foundation from 1990 – 2014, a time, which Lucy noted, was more like “the wild west.” Beucar, although deeply knowledgeable about the Barnes Foundation, also didn't know why an elevator replaced the Dutch Room. She stated that her tenure began in 2002 and she while she was aware of its

¹⁹⁶ Martha Lucy, Interview with Marth Lucy, Deputy Director for Research, Interpretation and Education at the Barnes Foundation, interview by Jessica A. Cooley, July 25, 2018.

existence thanks to archival photographs, she did not know the circumstances of its removal and elevator replacement.¹⁹⁷ I tried to get in touch with Glanton, but he did not return my inquiries. I want to make clear here that I am deeply grateful to Marth Lucy, Barbara Beaucar, and all the staff at the Barnes who were kind enough to take the time and energy to speak with me about this issue. The three days I spent there were met with a surprising level of generosity and openness, even escorting me on a trip to the old Merion building, which was by then, very much off limits to the public. I believe that their assumption of ADA compliance is not evidence of any underlying malice toward the ADA or disabled people, but perhaps a logical conclusion given that the ADA was passed in 1990 and the elevator installed in 1994. Because of the unconscious and conscious ableism that saturates all levels of life in the United States, we are in fact given very little choice but to make ableist assumptions about the ADA and disabled people. We might consider this default ableism an extension of Robert McRuer's "compulsory able-bodiedness," instead a compulsory ableism. This dissertation, as well as all scholarship in disability studies and crip theory, is meant to undermine compulsory ableism by bringing to the surface the underlying and unseen structures that make it so pervasive.

As is true of so many archival research trips, the questions one comes in with are often unanswerable in the way one hoped and this inconclusivity leaves an opening for informed speculation. These were my original questions:

1. Why did the curators pinpoint the ADA as the reason for the installation of the elevator?
2. Why did the board of trustees at the original building dismantle a gallery space, rather than simply place the elevator on the side of the building?

¹⁹⁷ Barbara Beaucar, Interview with Barbara Beaucar, Archivist at The Barnes Foundation, interview by Jessica A. Cooley, July 25, 2018.

3. Why, in the new Barnes Foundation building, which was meant to replicate the original gallery design, did they replicate the internal location for the elevator, rather than the Dutch Room? Why not rebuild the original Dutch Room and position the elevator elsewhere?
4. Why did no one in the 1990s, and no one today, seem to notice that an entire gallery was removed, a clear violation of Barnes' Indenture?

Because this event seemed to go unnoticed in the mid-90's and because there is scant information in the archives, I am left to speculate as to why I believe the elevator was not the result of ADA compliance and instead installed voluntarily. I hope this speculation makes clear that this chapter isn't really about the legal minutia of the elevator, but about how aspirational access can act as a model for thinking in excess of intentionality. However, I want to layout a few rationales for why I do think it is feasible that the installation of the elevator was a voluntary choice:

First: Because the Barnes Foundation was founded as, and continues to be, an educational institution (and not an art museum), it would have been classified as such. For those who spend time around buildings associated with educational institutions, you may have observed that buildings constructed before the passage of the ADA will likely not be physically accessible. And, why is this? Because under ADA law, access to education is not dictated by access to the physical structure of the building, but "the program when viewed in its entirety must be readily accessible."¹⁹⁸ In other words, to comply with federal law, in this case a subsection of the Electronic Code of Federal Regulations, an educational institution is not required to make its

¹⁹⁸ Laura F. Rothstein, *Disability Law: Cases, Materials, Problems*, 2nd ed, Michie Contemporary Legal Education Series (Charlottesville, Va: LEXIS Law Pub, 1998), 588.

buildings accessible for students, they are only required to deliver said information which could be done by "...assignment of aides to beneficiaries, home visits, delivery of health, welfare, or other social services at alternate accessible sites, ... or any other methods that result in making its program or activity accessible to handicapped persons. A recipient is not required to make structural changes in existing facilities."¹⁹⁹ At work in this legal explanation are the tensions between competing models of access, competing ideas of what it means to make education accessible, and the competing versions of what a museum institution is and does.

Second: The installation of an elevator that required the removal of a gallery and therefore the violation of Barnes' Indenture, and therefore a violation of law, would have likely been deemed "an undue burden" or, would not have been considered "readily achievable." Readily achievable meaning that it could not be "...easily accomplishable and able to be carried out without much difficulty or expense."²⁰⁰ The ADA stipulates that accommodations do not have to be made if they cause an undue burden or are not readily achievable.

Third: The Barnes Foundation would have been exempt from installing an elevator due to the ADA's "elevator exemption" clause that states the installation of an elevator is not required "...in a facility that is less than three stories..." The galleries of The Barnes Foundation were only two stories.

¹⁹⁹ "Electronic Code of Federal Regulations (e-CFR) Title 45 - Public Welfare Subtitle A - Department of Health and Human Services SUBCHAPTER A - GENERAL ADMINISTRATION PART 84 - NONDISCRIMINATION ON THE BASIS OF HANDICAP IN PROGRAMS OR ACTIVITIES RECEIVING FEDERAL FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE Subpart C - Accessibility.," § 84.22 Existing facilities (1977), https://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/text-idx?SID=1308a2bc51b6b1bb249e6e360cd247a8&mc=true&node=se45.1.84_122&rgn=div8.

²⁰⁰ Sen. Harkin, Tom [D-IA], "Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990," Pub. L. No. Public Law No: 101-336., § 36.304 Removal of barriers. (1990).

So, why did the board of the Barnes Foundation install the elevator? And, why was this narrative that the ADA was the cause later constructed in 2015? I cannot provide an answer to these questions. More importantly, this desire to resolve what cannot be resolved is counter to the goals of this chapter. What's at stake here is the question of how an institution responds to the implementation of an accommodation, in this case, an elevator. The response was that the ADA was assumed to be the damaging factor that excised a room from the body of the museum. In these assumptions, the ADA, the very law that protects the rights and needs of the disabled, somehow, in fact, disabled the Barnes. The 2015 reinstallation of the Dutch Room in *The Order of Things* comes to us under the cover of the ADA as a disabling agent that returns us to something like an inverse of the sick room. This reenactment of its existence is a kind of curative room to satisfy a fantasy of rehabilitation, and, in this case, architectural rehabilitation.

When Kavitha Koshy writes "I dream of more inclusive spaces," I take the call to dream seriously as a place to enact aspirational access as fictocriticism. What if neither legal compliance nor Barnes' desire to create welcoming environments for marginalized communities, was the basis for the installation of the elevator? What if, in fact, we look for significance beyond any and all intention? This gesture of access and inclusion without having been forced or compelled by law, signifies and works in excess of any original intention, which allows us not just a space to speculate, but also an actual opening that facilitates a portal onto dreaming. It is a portal through which all forms of inherent vice, be they material or conceptual – as is the case with the way the ADA was positioned as damaging force, its own form of inherent vice that erodes ableism – move beyond the confines of intention.

This is a dream where aspirational access takes up an elevator as a kind of magical portal that transports us to a world where care for body-minds, for ideas, and for objects does not

require permission or petition, but is there in advance. Much like the elevator that replaced the Dutch Room, most people don't know there ever was a time before. The elevator is assumed to have always already existed and there is something dreamy and certainly aspirational about that (Fig. 22). The elevator became so digested into the existence of the Barnes that in its rebuild in Philadelphia, the elevator maintained its place, right where the Dutch Room had been. They could have re-installed the Dutch Room which was present for almost seventy years (1925 – 1994), but it only took eighteen years of absence (1994 – 2012) for it to be forgotten. When Mia Mingus describes “access intimacy” as “that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else ‘gets’ your access needs,” she probably wasn't thinking of a case like this.

But, like all attempts to create access – whether through visual description, comfortable seating, access to affordable, universal health care, or an elevator – once in place, it's hard to go back. Once that access affordance functions to accommodate a need, even a need or desire people may not even have known they had or wanted, then the before can disappear. Against the model in which the structural transformations that accommodation might require is only loss or harm, the elevator that may have replaced a room no one remembers was even there, charts a different course. Mingus talks in terms of access intimacy as a feeling other people give you but, in a moment in which the Supreme Court tell us that corporations are persons, then we need to think seriously about what other institutions—especially threatened non-profits may do in modeling access intimacy as work that inanimate objects and features of design may also give us—a sense of affordance—a magical sense of the anticipation of our needs and desires.

Chapter 3 Figures



Figure 19. Reinstallation of the Dutch Room for *Mark Dion, Judy Pfaff, Fred Wilson: The Order of Things* (Philadelphia: The Barnes Foundation, 2015)



Figure 20. Left: The Dutch Room as it was installed in the original Merion Barnes Foundation Gallery, date unknown. Barnes Foundation Archive. Right: The Dutch Room as it was reconstructed in 2015



Figure 21. Left: The Barnes Foundation and Martha Lucy, eds., *Mark Dion, Judy Pfaff, Fred Wilson: The Order of Things* (Philadelphia: The Barnes Foundation, 2015), 48. Right: Reinstallation of the Dutch Room for *Mark Dion, Judy Pfaff, Fred Wilson: The Order of Things* (Philadelphia: The Barnes Foundation, 2015)



Figure 22. The elevator that replaced the Dutch Room, Barnes Foundation, Merion PA.
Photograph taken by author July, 2018

Conclusion
A Crip Material Haunting

In demonstrating the ethical implications of how we treat art objects and the buildings that house them by attending to the ways deteriorating, unstable, mad, weak, and noncompliant objects matter, *Crip Materiality: The Art Institution after the Americans with Disabilities Act* offers a new methodology for the study of art history and visual culture that also makes contributions to disability studies and crip theory. But this is not just a method, if method means that the end-goal is only the production of knowledge rather than change. In producing knowledge for change, *Crip Materiality* is also a tactic. It is a tactic to interrupt a long history of destructive institutional practices that seek to change or eliminate crip materiality through medical experimentation, eugenic ideology, and outright murder; and to eliminate crip materiality from our object worlds through deaccession, dumpsters, or perpetual storage. My focus on the art institution is not arbitrary. While I ask the field of art history to embrace disability studies, I am also asking the field of disability studies and crip theory to take up the Western imperial art museum as a locus of valuation that is held up to enshrine and reinforce the ideal, a project critical to understanding the eugenic logics that saturate the entire cultural complex. As a method and a tactic, crip materiality takes the art objects that curators and conservators mark as “dead,” or as immoral in the case of “inherent vice,” in addition to the ostensibly “damaging” architectural interventions made for creating inclusive spaces, and intervenes to claim them as crip, as mad, as weak, and as revolutionary. Crip materiality offers a place of belonging, of radical welcome, for that which has been castoff.

In Chapter 1, *Mad Objects: Claes Oldenburg’s Soft Screw*, the oozing sculpture is marked as an object of “inherent vice” by art conservators, curators, and its various owners. The

physical deterioration of the work has a maddening effect on its caretakers as they are presented with no way of stopping the deterioration and no way forward to understand its new form. The art institution operates on the assumption that the artwork is able to maintain its intended original form and if it does not, it ceases to exist as art. The failure of the art institution to imagine alternate forms and futures for objects of “inherent vice” outside of the de-aestheticized “teaching object” or non-art object is why crip materiality is vital. By offering those much-needed alternate paths forward, objects like *Soft Screw* hold equally valuable aesthetic possibilities. Specifically, in the case of *Soft Screw*, which is rhetorically marked as “self-destructing,” the irrational nature of the artwork is revalued through a mad-pride ethos that makes room for a neurodivergence that shows up as unstable, or “self-destructive.” The ethical implications being the ability to know and embrace new possibilities and distinguish that it is the ableist standards of mental fitness that are the failure, and not the artwork itself.

Chapter 2, *Weak Art: The Care of Eva Hesse*, presents a case where not only is the physical disintegration of an artwork in question but also the mental fitness of its maker. A feminist-crip analysis finds that Eva Hesse, a young woman who died of a brain tumor, was questioned and disbelieved by friends, curators, conservators, and scholars due to her doubled status as woman and disabled. While Claes Oldenburg’s unintentionally deteriorating sculptures did not impact his believability (likely also due to his white, able, cis, and heteronormative status), Hesse’s brain tumor and her deteriorating sculptures seem to have the effect of reciprocal contagion where Hesse becomes more unstable due to her uncertain intention toward the longevity of her sculptures, and her sculptures become less likely to be understood as maintaining their status as art object because they were created by a woman with a brain tumor. Crip materiality comes in to sustain the value and believability of Hesse pre- and post-brain

tumor as well as support the most physically transformed artworks that she created. By calling out the sexist and ableist ideologies underlying the conversation around Hesse and her art, works like *Sans III*, which were determined to be “not alive,” can be revived as new forms with new potentialities.

Chapter 3, *Aspirational Access (at The Barnes Foundation): Dreaming Spaces of Belonging* is both critique and praise for an art institution that is materially and ideologically shaped by disability, a point that, until this dissertation, was largely unrecognized. Barnes’s biography was formed by disability: his father was disabled, as a young doctor with an abiding interest in psychology he chose to intern at Pennsylvania’s State Hospital for the Insane, and later he became co-creator of Argyrol, a drug widely used to treat infections of the eye. At a time when art collecting in the United States and the study and practice of psychology were still rather conservative, Barnes’ early collecting of Modern and Impressionist art coupled with his unusual curatorial decisions and display techniques, often marked him and the art he collected as disabled. Barnes and the artists in his collection were considered disabled by mental illness and presumably disabled by eye diseases that were thought to distort perceptions of color and form. The later accusation must have been particularly irritating for the man who made such a sweeping breakthrough in treating diseases of the eye. I use aspirational access to understand that the installation of an elevator at the original Barnes gallery in the 1990s that displaced The Dutch Room was not, as curators later claimed, a destructive act mandated to legally comply with the ADA, but one of radical welcome that is in line with the history of Barnes and the art he collected. In this I argue that even in the most obvious of structural changes made for access (ramps and elevators) there is something more radical at stake, the ongoing dream of creating welcome. This is especially apparent by the fact that in the new Barnes, which was intended to

replicate the old Barnes gallery entirely, the Dutch Room was not reinstalled. Instead, the elevator remains. A recent structural intervention to create access in the 1990s became part of the permanent architectural footprint. Aspirational access is when the history of an elevator shows up as always already there because it always already should have been. It is the enactment of a magical sense of the anticipation of our needs and desires

Crip Materiality: The Art Institution after the Americans with Disabilities Act will continue on after this dissertation in three ways: as a book, as an exhibition, and as a basis to form a crip activist movement to demand that museums and art institutions divest themselves of ableist financial and structural forces.²⁰¹ The book will take this dissertation as its starting point to expand all the current chapters and include one additional chapter that will serve as a manifesto for why a crip activist movement in the museum and art institution is necessary and how to make it possible. The exhibition will take the form of a crip activist intervention where works by crip artists and allies will think with marginalized and excluded forms of mattering, including forms of decay. Lastly, I will gather my network of colleagues, activists, and friends through a website that will create an archive of ableist practices in the art institution, create a timeline for significant crip art events, and be a platform to strategize about how to demand changes in specific art institutions.

At the core of *Crip Materiality* are two issues: one, the question of value – how to measure it, perhaps even how to insure it (demonstrated by the history of “inherent vice”); and two, how to forge a crip activism in the art institution. This dissertation intervenes in the problem

²⁰¹ By ableist financial structures I am alluding to the protests that demanded museums divest from the Sackler Family Fortunes because of their role in creating and propagating the opioid pandemic. Nan Goldin, “The Uses of Power: Nan Goldin,” *Artforum International* 56, no. 5 (January 2018): 126–28.

of value that is central to the art institution's function within capitalism (as conservator, caretaker, and guarantor of value in capitalist terms) and the history of insurance as a for-profit industry. My use of *crip materiality* in this project specifically engages art objects and the buildings that house them in order to hold the art institution accountable to its promise of inclusion.

Crip Materiality also has broader implications that push our understanding of what inclusion can be, what it can look like, feel like, and act like. One way in which inclusion can feel and act differently in the art institution is to recognize its potential for *crip activism*, which also means asking scholars of disability studies and *crip theory* to care about the effects of art institutions as foundational, rather than tangential, to the dismantlement of ableism. Black Lives Matter, Decolonize this Place, and Strike MoMA have all focused on the tactical site of the art museum, monuments, and statues for activist intervention.²⁰² But, where is the comparable activist movement from *crip artists* and activists to use the art museum, monuments, and statues for activist intervention? Why do we not have a *Crip the Culture* movement? I argue that because disability and *crip scholars* have not understood the art institution (beyond issues of representation and physical access) as central to the ableist cultural complex, the *crip activist response* has not yet been possible. Let this be a call to make it possible. As the originator of the term, method, and tactic of *crip materiality*, I am claiming it as a *Cripistemology* specifically to *crip the art institution*. *Crip materiality* is a tactic to forge a politics that recognizes art museums,

²⁰² “Black Lives Matter,” <https://blacklivesmatter.com>; Claire Selvin and Tessa Solomon, “Toppled and Removed Monuments: A Continually Updated Guide to Statues and the Black Lives Matter Protests,” *Art News*, June 11, 2020, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/monuments-black-lives-matter-guide-1202690845/>; “Decolonize This Place,” <https://decolonizethisplace.org>; “Strike MoMA,” <https://www.strikemoma.org>.

institutions, and public art projects are central sustainers of the ableist framework that upholds the killing norm and fantasy figure of sovereignty.

While developing my concept of cripp materiality I have simultaneously been working as a guest curator for the Ford Foundation Gallery, where I have employed the methods and tactics of cripp materiality. I was originally commissioned (with colleague Ann M. Fox) to co-curate an exhibition reflecting on the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, scheduled to open in July of 2020. However, this planning unexpectedly coincided with the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the Ford Foundation headquarters shut down to prevent the spread of the virus, and as the call for justice grew in the streets following the murder of George Floyd, we pivoted to employ cripp curatorial methods that reshaped the exhibition in terms of subject, timing, and format. These methods prioritize creative flexibility to care for the physical safety and health of artists and audience; to reorient the duration of the exhibition to echo the slow time, or the *cripp time*, of the pandemic; and to commission new works. These new commissions make public space for rituals of collective grief and mourning while also addressing how to survive as bodyminds intersecting with disability, race, class, gender, and sexuality – complex embodiments often deemed disposable. What emerged is an exhibition reshaped by COVID-19 and reworked with a focus on disability justice’s call to end white supremacist violence titled *INDISPOSABLE: Structures of Support after the ADA*.

At the heart of *Indisposable* is my conceptualization of cripp materiality, which demands that we protect, value, and foreground cripp material forms that the state, art institutions, and larger society have deemed disposable. I specifically chose to include two artists in the exhibition whose work not only aligns with cripp materiality but also pushes it in new directions. Artist and scholar Jill H. Casid takes loss and grief as her medium by summoning the “material

fragility of analogue photography to commune with the incalculable but still powerful presence of unredressed loss”²⁰³ (Fig. 23). Artist and writer Kiyon Williams’ mediums are moss that they harvested from rocks, fungus that they have cultivated to then carve out new forms, and soil that they dug out of grounds where ships carrying kidnapped, enslaved peoples first landed in the United States as they were forced into chattel slavery (Fig. 24 and 25). Williams writes that the soil he collects “is silent witness to the historical and ongoing dispossession of Black people in America.”²⁰⁴ The visual glitches and volatility of Casid’s Polaroids, acknowledge the inability to witness, recognizing the unknowability of the unbearable and unredressed loss of life during the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing HIV/AIDS crisis. In Williams’ fragmented, abstract, and – in the case of their mycelium (fungi) works – growing and dying forms, their work also points to the inability to comprehend the magnitude of Black suffering. Crip materials – Williams’ soil and Casid’s Polaroids – carry and hold within themselves the ability to undo themselves. Soil will change form, fall apart, become dirt to be swept up on the gallery floor and Polaroids, inherently fragile, are vulnerable to light, heat, and the passage of time. These are crip materials working on behalf of crip existence. The charged and charging histories carried in the very molecules of their being, creation, and destruction is the volatile material history of, to quote Christina Sharpe, “a past that is not past, a past that is with us still; a past that cannot and should not be pacified in its presentation.”²⁰⁵

²⁰³ Jill H. Casid, “Indisposable: Structures of Support After the ADA. Chapter 5, Melancholy as Medium, Chapter Conceived by Jill H. Casid,” June 9, 2021, <https://www.fordfoundation.org/about/the-ford-foundation-center-for-social-justice/ford-foundation-gallery/events/indisposable-structures-of-support-after-the-ada-chapter-5/>.

²⁰⁴ The Shed and Kiyon Williams, “Using Soil as a Salve for Historical and Contemporary Violence,” 2020, <https://theshed.org/program/159-kiyan-williams>.

²⁰⁵ Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 62.

Crip materiality is a method, a tactic, and as evidenced in *Indisposable*, a curatorial practice to forge an aesthetic, a politics, and an activist call that creates radical welcome for vulnerable, unwanted, and sick materiality. Crip materials are also those of death and dying. The ashes, dust, ooze, fungal and bacterial growths will create a crip material haunting that hovers over the murderous ideologies that continue to dispose of the vulnerable. There is a crip material haunting of the art institutions' vaults where objects slowly shift and in doing so quietly shift the foundation of Western imperialist projects that cling to ableist standards of being and knowing. And, a crip material haunting that is less quiet and slow – one that will bang on the door of the art institution and demand more...more care, more respect for the non-binary existence of objects and humans, more health care, more sick leave, more networks, more debt canceling, more ramps, more free childcare, more touch-tours, more free food, more free museum admission, more Black trans women Directing museums, more Latinx curators, more Indigenous everything, more crips, more crips in charge of building and creating access, more naps, more community control, more crip materiality, more ethical funding, more places to sit in art institutions, more comfortable places to sit in art institutions, more visual description, more dreams, more listening, more welcome.

Conclusion Figures



Figure 23. Jill Casid, Polaroid still from *Untitled (Melancholy as Medium)*, 2021



Figure 24. Kiyon Williams, Studio shot of work in progress for *Indisposable: Structures of Support after the ADA*, 2021. Shared on their Instagram, @kiyanwilliams



Figure 25. Kiyon Williams, work in progress for *Indisposable: Structures of Support after the ADA*, 2021. Photograph: © Sebastian Bach

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