Care, Collectivity, and Disabled Futurity

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CARE, COLLECTIVITY, AND DISABLED FUTURITY

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CARE, COLLECTIVITY, AND DISABLED FUTURITY

A Thesis Presented to the Graduate Faculty of the
Meadows School of the Arts
Southern Methodist University

in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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with a
Major in Art History

by

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How does care manifest in contemporary art? How do artists visualize kinship? These are some of the questions guiding this thesis. In considering the depiction of care in contemporary art, there is a limited application of the concept. Understood through the scope of feminist discourse on the sexual division of labor, care becomes restrained the context of familial obligation according to the nuclear family structure, such as in the case of parental obligation. This characterization of care implies that it is a burden upon the care provider and functions to exploit labor, especially on the part of women. However, this thesis proposes an expanded analysis of care, shifting the focus in order to accommodate for care as it appears in queer kinship networks. Applying a theoretical framework drawing upon feminist theory, disability studies, and Crip theory, this thesis examines the artwork of contemporary American artist Park McArthur, whose work reflects her embodied experiences of disability. Reflecting her position as a disabled adult who receives care, McArthur employs a variety of media in her body of work. Created in conversation with minimalist and conceptualist art, her interrogation of care contributes to the theoretical inquiries being made with Crip theory, disability studies, and feminist theory.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: AUTONOMY</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: DEPENDENCY</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3: ACCESSIBILITY</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POSTSCRIPT: DISABLED FUTURITY</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILLUSTRATIONS</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Image 2. Card File, Robert Morris, 1962 ....................................................................................48
Image 4. Polyurethane Foam, Park McArthur, 2016 .................................................................50
Image 5. Carried and Held, Park McArthur, 2021 .....................................................................51
Image 7. Still from It’s Sorta Like a Big Hug, Park McArthur, 2012, 16:53 ............................53
Image 11. Ramps installation view, Park McArthur, 2014 ..........................................................57
Image 12. Ramps Off-site installation view, Park McArthur, 2014 .............................................58
Image 13. Identity Capital installation view, John Knight, 1998 ...............................................59
Image 15. Ramps installation view, Park McArthur, 2014 ..........................................................61
Image 17. How to get a wheelchair over sand, Park McArthur, 2013 .......................................63
Image 18. During the month of August, Park McArthur, 2013 ..................................................64
Image 19. STUDIO/HOME, Park McArthur, 2018, Second Configuration .............................65

I owe my success to the support and guidance of my advisor, Dr. Anna Lovatt, who originally encouraged me to pursue graduate school. I am grateful for all of my professors in the Department of Art History who have shaped my scholarship and academic development. Though we are physically distanced, the comradery of my cohort and other classmates has encouraged me through this difficult journey.

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INTRODUCTION

How does care manifest in contemporary art? How do artists visualize kinship? These are some of the questions guiding this thesis. In considering the depiction of care in art of the last fifty years, I recognize a limited application of the concept. When understood through feminist discourse criticizing the sexual division of labor, care as an embodied practice is often constrained to the scope of family obligation: a parental figure, almost always the mother, must care for a child dependent, and that labor poses a burden upon the woman, exploiting her social position so that her labor is rendered invisible and underpraised. However, I propose a different consideration of care in contemporary art that applies beyond this realm of obligation within the nuclear family, shifting the focus in order to accommodate for care as it appears especially in the context of queer kinship networks. This additionally broadens the scope of care itself, so that it includes conditional experiences of dependency such as in the context of disability. I apply this theoretical exploration of care from feminist and disability studies, in addition to the framework of Crip theory, by means of examining artwork by the contemporary American artist Park McArthur. McArthur reflects her position as a disabled adult within her body of work, employing the use of readymade objects like medical equipment and personal belongings, in addition to other sculptural and installation pieces that apply to disability discourse more
broadly. Thus, functioning in conversation with minimalism and conceptualism, McArthur’s interrogation of care contributes to the kind of inquiries being made on the theoretical level by Crip theory, disability studies, and feminist theory. Born in 1984 in North Carolina, Park McArthur is a New York based artist. She works primarily in sculpture, including readymade objects, and installation, but also utilizes text, sound, and photographs in her art. She acquired her B.A. at Davidson College in 2006 and her M.F.A. at University of Miami in 2009. From 2011-2012, McArthur participated in the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program, and she studied at the Skowhegan School of Sculpture and Painting in 2012 as well. McArthur began showing in group and solo exhibitions in 2009 and continues to do so as recently as 2021. Diagnosed with an unknown form of degenerative muscular dystrophy in her childhood, McArthur began requiring significant physical assistance in the early years of her adulthood. In an interview with Daniel Palmer for Mousse Magazine in 2015, McArthur responds to a question about whether her being a wheelchair user constitutes an identity akin to being black, queer, or feminist. She responds saying that “Just as Adrian Piper wouldn’t have made Adrian Piper’s work without being a black philosopher in a white supremacist world, I wouldn’t have made Ramps if I didn’t ‘use a wheelchair’ in an ableist world. (Ableism is the oppression of disabled people and the privileging of nondisabled people).” Indeed, McArthur’s body of work is largely informed by her experiences living as a disabled person, drawing upon her personal life in addition to disability discourse. Additionally, she engages with practices such as institutional critique through considerations of space and built environment, as well as investigating topics like meaning and signification in relation to memory.

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Having both emerged in the 1970s in conjunction with second wave feminism and the disability rights movement respectively, feminist theory and disability studies form the underpinnings of my methodology. Júlia Campos Clímaco, in the article “Constructions of motherhood in feminist and disability studies,” affirms the relationship between gender and disability as socially and historically situated identities understood in relation to ‘normality.’ Moreover, she likens the experience of disability to the experience of womanhood, in that “the same division between public and private that [reserves] for women private space and care for the production and reproduction of life also [restricts] the lives of people with disabilities…” Despite these similarities, however, Campos Clímaco notes the absence of disability studies as applied to feminist theory. Regarding the topic of care specifically, Christine Kelly proposes a framework of “accessible care” as a means of bridging this gap between feminist literature and disability studies, advocating for a critical relationship between the two fields in which they can be mutually critical of each other’s ideas.

Building upon this proposal, I draw upon Crip theory as an existing methodological framework for expanding the literature on care which can account for the shortcomings of both feminist theory and disability studies. Crip theory describes the “critically disabled and queer perspectives and practices that have been deployed to resist the contemporary spectacle of able-bodied heteronormativity.” Rather than conforming to the normalization of able-bodiedness and heterosexuality as the standard experience for which the world is shaped, Crip theory instead

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3 Ibid, 4.
4 Christine Kelly, “Building Bridges with Accessible Care: Disability Studies, Feminist Care Scholarship, and Beyond,” *Hypatia* 28, no. 4 (2013): 792.
recognizes and centers the position of non-normative bodies and utilizes embodied experience as a source of information. Thus, it utilizes the fluidity of identity as encompassed by both disability and queerness. In a review of Robert McRuer’s 2006 book *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, Alison Kafer describes Crip theory as contesting “liberal notions of acceptance, tolerance, and assimilation”; Crip theory rejects the perceived opposition between disability and an imagined future progress.\(^6\) Moreover, this framework problematizes the predominant models of disability, namely the medical and social models. The medical model of disability, as described by Dan Goodley, reduces the experience of disability to a biological, genetic, hormonal, neurological, or psychological phenomenon.\(^7\) Responding to this medicalization, the social model of disability mobilizes disability not only as a physical condition, but as a political category, identifying the “social, economic, and cultural barriers” that further marginalize disabled people.\(^8\) As opposed to utilizing either of these, Crip theory proposes a more nuanced approach, including the political and relational model, which centers lived experience in relation to one’s environment and society. In conjunction with this, I also utilize Bess Williamson’s concept of *cripistemology*, which she offers to describe the epistemology of disability—a means through which to know and encounter the world; applied to the artwork of McArthur, particularly, *cripistemology* acts as a useful tool for understanding the way in which disability inherently shapes how individuals understand and navigate the world.\(^9\)

\(^6\) Alison Kafer, “What’s Crip About Queer Theory Now?,” *Sex Roles* 60, no. 3 (February 1, 2009): 292
\(^8\) Ibid, 7.
Structured thematically, this thesis contains four parts which relate through the overarching theme of care. In the context of this thesis, care is understood as a concern for and maintaining of another person according to their needs, and acts of care can manifest both physically, through tasks such as dressing, and emotionally, through the provision of companionship and fostering of intimate relationships. Each section considers how artworks by McArthur contribute to broader discourses on care, and, moreover, I contextualize McArthur’s art historically through comparisons with other artworks that relate formally or thematically.

Chapter 1, Autonomy, focuses on how McArthur’s work approaches the imagined neutral of independence which capitalist, liberal society poses as the ideal state of being. Understood through the scope of self-determination and self-government, autonomy implies an aspirational state of financial and social independence, as well as peak physical ability. Assumed autonomy eliminates the need for care or other social networks, isolating a person or thing from the surrounding environment and, thus, reinforcing the institutional conditions which promote and produce the normative models of able-bodiedness. *Social Security, 2008-2013* draws upon this notion of isolation and self-reliance encompassed by autonomy. In this work, McArthur displays her own custom-built computer tower, containing personal files, as a virtually obsolete object.

Positioned as contrary to Autonomy, Chapter 2 explores Dependency as a natural state of human connectedness in which “one individual is seen as intertwined with the flourishing of others.” 10 McArthur explores her own lived experience of dependency through an experimental network of care that she terms a ‘care collective’; this collective demonstrates connectedness beyond the heteronormative nuclear family, queering the structures of kinship.11 This experience is recorded

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11 My foundation for this transformed idea of the family comes from Kath Weston’s book *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*. In this text, Weston challenges the category of “fictive kin” to describe relations outside of
in the work *Carried and Held*, a perpetually unfinished object that demonstrates multiple points of contingency. Documenting her dependency both in text and video, McArthur also utilizes objects as evidence, such as in *Blue Snowflake Commode*, demonstrating the physical effects of care and dependency. Traces of dependency mark the afterlife of those relationships and, thus, imbue everyday objects with affect. The final section, Chapter 3, considers Accessibility in terms of care. Shifting beyond the private domain of care, accessibility characterizes the ability to engage with public spaces. Physical manifestations of accessibility, such as architectural accommodations, determine how an individual can interact with space, mediating those experiences. McArthur engages with accessibility by utilizing objects that grant her access as a wheelchair user, such as in *Ramps*, an installation of temporary ramp structures which have been borrowed from various locations visited by the artist. These ramps not only alter the space in which they are placed, but also demonstrate the lengths one must go in order to make spaces accessible when they are not necessarily intended to be so. Though usually considered in the context of public spaces and institutions, accessibility also pertains to the relationship between care providers and care receivers, wherein care functions as a mechanism through which accessibility can be granted.

My thesis concludes with a Postscript entitled ‘Disabled Futurity in Contemporary Art.’ This section highlights ongoing issues in need of further research and explores the ways in which contemporary art can be understood through theories of care. Affirming an imagined future which includes the existence of disability, Disabled Futurity describes what that time may

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the heteronormative nuclear family, highlighting the socially constructed nature of all conceptions of the family. Rather than framing queer kinship as derivative of the nuclear family, Weston instead positions them as a historical transformation that centers around choice; Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*, Revised edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).
McArthur poses her care collective as an experiment investigating the myriad problems within the institution of care for disabled people. She further explores these issues in another installation, *During the Month of August ESSEX STREET Will be Closed*, from 2013. In utilizing the exterior space of the gallery, transforming the facade into an imagined location with an unknown interior, attention is drawn to what lies behind the closed doors. This model problematizes the dichotomy of public and private space, blurring the separation between the two and allowing for a kind of critical visibility that also reckons with the theoretical and representational gaps regarding care.
CHAPTER 1
AUTONOMY

Appearing first as just a black prism placed upon the ground, from afar Park McArthur’s Social Security, 2008-2013 cites the forms associated with minimalist objects [Image 1].

Consisting of a single black computer tower, which the artist has custom built, the simply shaped work stands plainly, unattached to any sort of cords or other accessories one might expect to accompany the device. Measuring 17 ½ inches long by 9 1/4 inches wide by 19 ¼ inches high, the computer shrinks in comparison to any viewer who might approach it, especially when displayed on the floor as opposed to a pedestal or other stand. Placed in this manner, the computer appears like a miniature monolith of sorts, not necessarily imposing but certainly out of place and off-putting. As a readymade object, however, the computer still retains a level of familiarity despite its isolation on the ground. Nevertheless, the presentation of this computer tower in the context of a gallery transcends its quotidian nature, granting it a level of gravitas and elevating it into the realm of a legitimate art object. The front panel of the tower displays various buttons, as well as a disk drive and other ports intended for use with accessories. However, in its passive state, unplugged from a power source and unconnected from a monitor, the computer

12 Here the term minimalist objects is used to describe the relatively simple geometric sculptures by artists such as Donald Judd or Tony Smith, which exist as non-referential works centered on the physical characteristics of the object.
cannot actually realize its intended function; instead, the object is rendered useless and, thus, sits neglected. Placed above the disk drive, black, rectangular components emphasize the modular, geometric form of the computer, while the four small, white labels printed onto the drive itself break up the monotonous features and refer to information outside of the object. On the lower half of the panel, three smaller rectangular pieces, similar to those above the disk drive, run parallel to a power button and two unlit lights embedded into the black, plastic surface; the clear plastic of the lights denote the passive state of the computer, not in use and with the power turned off. Circular holes placed in a grid formation create two square-shaped outlines, functioning as air vents at the bottom of the front panel, and placed in the small space between these and the bottom of the panel is a silver, square label sticker. Imposed on the metallic square, white text outlined by a blue rectangle reads “LIAN LI” and a company logo appears with a white and green design. Only this feature, denoting the brand of the computer case, breaks up the monochrome object, drawing the viewer’s eye to the bottom of the panel just above where it meets the ground. Like the labels printed onto the disk drive, this brand label functions as a referent, marginally connecting the computer to information outside of itself. The top and side panels of the computer are unremarkable, with only some slits for ventilation atop the structure. Plain black panels connect the front and back sides of the computer, both of which are made equally visible to the viewer. This positioning, wherein the back panel of the computer is on full display, further contributes to its decontextualization in the gallery; typically, this part of the object would be placed against a wall or along the back of a desk, so as to hide the various cords that power the computer and connect it to other components. Here, however, the silver-colored metal panel, riddled with multi-colored ports and jacks for use with the different accessories, along with the circular vent and other parts, provide a counter to the otherwise monochrome
object. Normally hidden when in use, the visual interest provided by the back panel of the computer contributes to the duality of the object, in addition to its role as either functional or art object.\textsuperscript{13}

Stored within the computer, the hard drive contains every email, image, and file created or saved by McArthur between the years of 2008 and 2013.\textsuperscript{14} Mirroring the unconnected nature of the physical object, the information saved to the computer, too, exists in isolation. Without any sort of backup, the existence of the data is contingent upon the physical integrity of the computer and requires deliberate effort to access, thus occupying a position of precarity and vulnerability. This dynamic between the outer, physical embodiment of the computer and the information that it contains demonstrates a tension between the public, outward facing nature of the object and the private knowledge contained within. The isolation of both the object within the gallery and the data saved to it informs a state of autonomy for the computer in various ways. From a visual standpoint, the formal qualities of the work, which reference the style of minimalist sculpture, grant it aesthetic autonomy. Aesthetic autonomy centers the appearance of an artwork, placing value upon the physical characteristics or representation thereof, as opposed to referential representation. Indeed, in his 1914 book \textit{Art}, Clive Bell writes that “To appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing but a sense of form and color and a knowledge of three-dimensional space.”\textsuperscript{15} From Clive Bell and Roger Fry in Britain to Clement Greenberg in the United States, this notion of aesthetic autonomy was a central tenet of modernist art criticism, defined by the formalist approach which emphasized the autonomy of an art object over its

\textsuperscript{13} The absurdity of analyzing a computer tower as if it were a sculpture or other art object is not lost on me. However, this dynamic contributes to the interrogation of the computer as a secure object later in the chapter.

\textsuperscript{14} While this characteristic is discussed in texts reviewing the exhibition or discussing the work of McArthur, this fact does not appear in the actual caption for the work.

\textsuperscript{15} Clive Bell, \textit{Art} (Great Britain: New York Frederick A. Stokes Company Publishers, 2005), 47.
socio-historical context. For example, in discussing artists such as Picasso, Kandinsky, and Matisse, Greenberg asserts that “the excitement of their art seems to lie most of all in its pure preoccupation with the intervention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, colors, etc.”¹⁶ This notion, centering the formal aspects of the artwork and disregarding the referential characteristics, applies to Social Security through the signification of the object as opposed to the information that it contains. Without knowledge of the data stored on the computer, it only has value because of its physical form and characteristics, and the isolation of the computer, which has rendered it useless as an actual device, emphasizes this focus on form. Additionally, the single location for the computer’s data eliminates any sort of reliance on outside technology and software, even if that poses the risk of losing it forever, and that potential for loss or corruption problematizes the notion of security posed by the title. McArthur engages with the discourse of autonomy in Social Security through the display of the computer as independent and non-relational. Disconnected from a power source and decontextualized in the setting of the gallery, the usual understanding of the computer no longer applies. The elimination of relational connections fundamentally alters the way that the object exists, rendering it virtually obsolete despite the wealth of data that it contains. In its disengaged state, it functions only as a physical presence and, consequently, sacrifices meaning and connection for aesthetic autonomy and obsolescence. Thus, the artist interrogates the value attributed to autonomy by demonstrating its fallibility and ultimate vulnerability.

The self-containment of information exhibited by Social Security engages with the ideas explored by Robert Morris’s Card File from 1962 [Image 2]. As a relic of a time preceding the digital age, the information stored within Card File manifests physically on the cards, but, like

Social Security, the details are still obscured from view. Though the outward facing labels hint at the ideas typed onto the cards, the actual text is not readily displayed. Additionally, the two artworks function as records of their own making, acting as physical evidence of the accumulation processes. Morris documented his thoughts and actions on the cards, which are then displayed within the file itself, while McArthur collected digital files and data within the computer, granting it some significance along with its physical form. Even so, both Morris and McArthur had to acquire the information stored within the artworks; neither Card File nor Social Security generate their own information independent of the artist or outside sources. Thus, the autonomy that characterizes the two works results from an appropriation and accumulation of resources, whether that be the physical cards or the digital files. Despite the end result of self-containment and autonomy, both works had to first depend on another source of information or material, and, in this way, the impression of autonomy reveals an inevitable dependency on something else.

This accumulation of value, drawing upon something or someone else in order to sustain power and independence, relates more broadly to the modernist notions of autonomy. As a societal ideal, value is placed upon the ability to function independently, unencumbered by reliance on someone else or on outside resources. McArthur makes reference to these kinds of resources, social safety nets that are negatively associated with the fear of a nanny state, with the title of her work, Social Security. In the context of the United States, this makes direct reference to the government’s Social Security System, which provides retirement, survivor, and disability benefits and intends to ensure some sense of financial independence and safety through fixed

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income payments. Like the vulnerability exhibited by McArthur’s work, the actual system of Social Security also fails to guarantee independence or financial security, as is often the case for disabled beneficiaries. According to the website for Social Security Administration, the amount of money a disabled individual receives from these payments is barely enough to keep that person above the poverty line. This liminal state, balancing between financial security and poverty, mirrors the tension that McArthur draws out in her artwork. The facade of independence and autonomy granted by small amounts of money or the black shell of the computer overshadows the potential threat of financial or digital insecurity.

Autonomy as a concept encompasses several understandings of the word. In the article “Autonomy, Relationality, and Feminist Ethics,” author Jean Keller discusses the tension between autonomy and feminist care ethics, describing the former as individualistic and asocial. Regarding philosophical literature, “autonomy has been thought to be possible to the extent that we are able to overcome our socialization and social context and act in accordance with what our ‘authentic selves’ (asocially conceived) ‘really want’.” This definition of autonomy involves a disregard for the care of others, ignoring social norms and relationships in order to pursue one’s own desires and goals. Held up as “the pinnacle of human achievement” and “the source of human dignity,” this idea of autonomy becomes conflated not only with independence, but also isolation, prioritizing one’s self over connection and consideration of others. Moreover, liberal political theories position independence as the norm of personhood,

19 Theorists focusing on the feminist ethics of care must often reconcile the necessity of care with the social burden placed upon women who are forced into positions as caregivers, thus reinforcing systems of oppression and marginalization.
necessitating an affirmation of autonomy because of its foundational role in defining that state of being.\textsuperscript{22} However, autonomy and independence do not necessarily mean the same thing. Independence describes a lack of influence from outside forces, including physical aid, whereas autonomy relates more so to self-determination or self-governance, such that autonomy does not require self-subsistence.

However, in the context of care, the self is constituted according to relationships with others. Philosopher and Disability scholar Eva Feder Kittay writes that the self “is not a solitary and independent self whose interests and concerns primarily begin and end with the boundaries of one’s skin.”\textsuperscript{23} Indeed, the self is porous and connected. As such, when considered in conversation with care, the notions of autonomy discussed above become problematic and, ultimately, unachievable. Because the practice of care necessitates a relational understanding of the self, Keller proposes either a nuancing of autonomy as a concept or a shift away from it as an aspirational standard.\textsuperscript{24} Likewise, Kittay, who also writes from the perspective of care, argues that “one does not need to demonstrate autonomy to command respect.”\textsuperscript{25} Informed by her experience as a caregiver for her disabled daughter, Kittay warns of the risk of dehumanization and further marginalization of vulnerable peoples when autonomy is not only touted as the ideal, but positioned as the norm.

Like Social Security, the works Passive Vibration Isolation 2, 3 from 2014 also utilize the visual language of minimalist art [Image 3]. Affixed to the gallery wall, the laminated

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Shiloh Y. Whitney, “Dependency Relations: Corporeal Vulnerability and Norms of Personhood in Hobbes and Kittay on JSTOR,” \textit{Hypatia,} Ethics of Embodiment, 26, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 555.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Eva Feder Kittay, “The Relationality and the Normativity of an Ethic of Care,” in \textit{The Oneness Hypothesis,} ed. Philip J. Ivanhoe et al., Beyond the Boundary of Self (Columbia University Press, 2018), 121.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Keller, “Autonomy, Relationality, and Feminist Ethics,” 154.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Kittay, “The Relationality and the Normativity of an Ethic of Care,” 134.
\end{itemize}
rubber loading dock bumpers emerge as black blocks, attached to the white walls with silver metal bolts. These bumpers serve to absorb the shock from trucks and trailers, protecting the dock from damage. Intended to withstand physical trauma, they resist the physical effects of contact and maintain themselves despite the abuse. L-shaped pieces of black metal flank the central component of the bumper, which is a ribbed, black piece of rubber. The four bolts and nuts that are drilled into the wall, along with the black bolts holding the rubber in place and the overall rectangular form of the object, contribute to the symmetry of the bumpers when faced head-on. However, because of the vertical placement of the bumpers on the wall of the gallery, it is difficult to fully view them in this way; placed slightly out of the viewer’s line of sight, the placement of the bumpers is appropriate to their original function as opposed to their recontextualized purpose as objects for display. This resistance to the gallery environment suggests a stronger sense of autonomy when compared to Social Security; whereas Passive Vibration reads as if the backdrop for the bumpers was just switched from the loading dock to the gallery wall, Social Security demonstrates a clearer transition from functional object to art object. The way in which the viewer can circle around the computer tower, examining it from nearly every angle save for the side that sits on the ground, the bumpers retain their distance from human interaction.

When paired with Social Security, Passive Vibration Isolation 2, 3 more clearly demonstrate how autonomy can manifest and what kind of effect it has on the people who encounter it. Returning again to Keller’s description of autonomy as understood in philosophical literature, Passive Vibration exhibits an indifference toward the concerns and needs of others, in this case the viewer. Though intended to interact with something outside of themselves, the truck at a loading dock, the bumpers retain their autonomy through this self-imposed distance or
through impact and mistreatment, whether that be from actual use and, thus, physical trauma, or as a result of misplacement, as seen here. As such, they hold out against the expectation of their new context, defying the categorization of art object, which is further emphasized by their status as ready-mades. Whereas *Social Security* adapts to its appropriation in the gallery, made easier by its literal disconnectedness and the erasure of its original context completely, *Passive Vibration* continues to act as if still in use. The effect of this gives insight to the broader consequences of pursuing autonomy: unwilling to accommodate or adjust oneself for the benefit of others can result in a kind of neglect. Without the intention of being seen and understood by the viewer, the bumpers reinforce their own isolation in the gallery. When the viewer attempts to approach them, the inability to connect either emotionally, due to the un-affective nature of the rubber and metal objects in addition to physical distance between the viewer and the just-out-of-reach bumpers on the wall, results in a sense of alienation. In a gallery, where the art is meant to be observed, the viewer is made to feel unwelcome and equally, if not more, out of place. Because of this frustration, dismissing the bumpers and looking past them becomes relatively easy. Thus, a sort of mutual contempt emerges, further reinforcing the self-isolation of the bumpers in addition to the newly found state of alienation on the part of the viewer, who is made to feel unwelcome in the physical space of the gallery.

Another example of this imposition on the part of the art object is observable in the installation *Poly*, also by McArthur, from 2016 [Image 4]. One of many works using this material, this iteration includes three large pillars of polyurethane foam, which are in line with each other and positioned with little space in between them. Readymade, like the other two works of hers discussed in this chapter, these blocks of foam echo *Social Security* with their solid, black forms. Multiplied and enlarged in this work, the trio of foam monoliths function to
absorb the sound in the gallery space where they are placed. Rather than reacting to sound, magnifying it or echoing it, the blocks instead eliminate it. In this way, the foam takes charge over the space and affects how viewers experience it, despite their rather contained placement. Like the bumpers in *Passive Vibration*, these foam blocks are readymade objects intended to absorb the impact of an encounter with an outside force, thus designed to be a responsive object. Though their recontextualization in an art gallery grants the initial impression of autonomy, the realization of their manufactured origin collapses this facade. Apart from the intentional placement of the polyurethane, they retain a kind of unaltered state that can also be applied to *Passive Vibration*. The edges of the foam reveal imperfections on the surface of the material, such as dimpled craters and variations in the overall color. Vertical lines run parallel to the forms on one of the outward facing sides, hinting to the industrial manufacturing that produced these objects, and horizontal striations run along the sides that the viewer can see, both of which draw the eyes down and across the surfaces of the foam bricks. Moreover, what looks to be a plastic protective layer over the outside of the foam has slightly peeling from the block placed on the outside of the trio, furthest away from the corner against which the group is situated. These minor imperfections are further evidence of the manufactured production of these objects, contributing to their appearance of misplacement.

The three works by McArthur included in this chapter share a similar relationship with the way in which they interact with outside forces, information, or means of contact. Though

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26 In the 2016 installation *Poly* at Chisenhale Gallery, the foam blocks were placed in a corner of the gallery space, pushed up against the wall [Image]. This minimizes the physical encounter with the foam, as a viewer can only view them as a group due to the lack of space in between them and the limited access to the whole of the objects. However, when occupying the corner of a room, they give the impression of a dark mass creeping up in the periphery. Despite their relative containment, the large size and close grouping of the foam contributes to a sense of impending threat when in close proximity to the artwork.
they absorb and retain those inputs, a mutual response does not occur in return; the acquisition occurs in one direction only, without any kind of sharing happening as a result. Social Security stores the information that has been saved to the computer, some of which must have been externally produced and then received via email or other means of sharing, but that data remains within the internal framework of the computer’s hard drive rather than being dispersed further. Additionally, it utilizes no external modes of data storage like a hard drive or cloud storage.

Passive Vibration Isolation 2, 3 and Polyurethane Foam both absorb input as a function of their physical forms, in contrast to an internal structure or mechanism. As such, the forces and sensory input that they absorb are not preserved in the same way that Social Security is meant to store its data. Rather, the encounter with these objects stops them: the effects of physical impact from a truck is minimized by the bumpers, reducing any sort of reverberations or damage elsewhere, while the foam absorbs the noise from the room in which it is placed. However, there is no way to access physical contact or the soundwaves dampened by these objects. Unlike the data in Social Security, these phenomenological experiences are merely ephemeral. Nevertheless, all three works remain connected to something outside of themselves, even if that relationship does not result in mutual feedback. These works not only provoke queries about their own states of being, but also about the impact they have on their surroundings and the people or things that encounter them.

Probing autonomy as an achievable state, or even just considering it as an imagined potential while acknowledging its faults, allows for discourse around care and dependency to shift away from autonomy as the norm. This chapter began with autonomy as a societal expectation, considering the various ways that has been defined, and related that discourse to autonomy as a concept in art. Using McArthur’s work, along with an example from Robert
Morris, this chapter has demonstrated the mechanisms of autonomy and considers its effects when put into practice. As a result, autonomy can be better framed as a faulty ideal that disregards social relations and negatively impacts others.
CHAPTER 2
DEPENDENCY

“Dependency acts as a reminder of something other than autonomous zones, embargoed relationships, and individuated desires. It provides a way of working that is neither colonial nor isolationist—but one that is far more difficult, far more complex. I believe that the forms of knowledge and experience gained from living with significant physical dependency and vulnerability have wider social significance.” --Park McArthur

On a vertical wall caption, the black text lists the standard information accompanying an artwork [Image 5]. Measuring 40 inches long and 8 inches wide, the white museum board displays the title, date, medium, and courtesy line. Aligned to the left of the label, a black, bold weight font reads “Carried and Held,” followed by the year of creation, 2021, in a lightweight font of the same style and size. Written on the line underneath this, the medium, ink on paper mounted on styrene board, appears in a smaller size. A noticeable space separates this top section from the courtesy line, which occupies most of the surface space on the label. It reads, in the same size font used for the medium, “Courtesy the artist and Margaret Herman, Alexandra McArthur, John McArthur, Walker Herman, Mary Herman, Gayle McArthur…” and so on, listing over 200 names in all. The courtesy line on this label sequentially documents the individuals who have physically carried and held the artist, providing some level of assistive care. Andrew Blackley touches upon the interpersonal
geometry of *Carried and Held*, describing how it “presents people, but only hints at that which people do: relate.” Unlike *Social Security*, mentioned in the previous chapter, this work does not represent a fixed period of time; its label has no indication of when the list begins, nor does it have a fixed endpoint. It continues in perpetuity, updated upon each new showing according to the standards of the institution displaying it, with the final name listed functioning as a placeholder for the next iteration. This continued renewal of names, the indefinite network of people with whom the artist interacts, demonstrates her specific experience of dependency. McArthur describes her relationship with dependency and external assistance as “a decades-long project of how to take the need for significant assistance out of the realm of childhood and stretch it along the trajectory of adulthood,” with her physical autonomy peaking “around age eleven.”

Requiring this kind of care beginning at the age of nineteen, the goals and expectations one might envision for their future, namely the independence that acts as a rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood, must be reconciled with the reality of disability and dependency; the need for caretaking will continue for the rest of the artist’s life as her ability to move and perform tasks on her own deteriorates over time.

The relationship between the artist and the people included on the label varies from the full names of family members and friends to restaurant and airline employees listed by first name only, extending even to the unnamed anonymous figures whom she has encountered. Paradoxically, the people listed specifically by name, with whom McArthur presumably has a closer relationship, are unknown and impersonal to the viewer, with the identities blurring

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27 Andrew Blackley, “Park McArthur: Geometry, Material, Scale,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 40 (September 2015): 55; Blackley uses this term “interpersonal geometry” to describe the dynamic between people and things, referring to proximal existences in a way that evokes a network or a diagram of relation.

together into an affectless block of text for the viewer. However, the interspersed anonymous mentions, such as “all the young men who felt obligated but unsure in volunteering” or “2 people living across the apartment at UM,” possess an unexpected emotional charge, capturing the random moments of interaction with strangers. Described by Eva Feder Kittay who, as discussed in the previous chapter, positions care as a positive and valuable dynamic, “Relations of affection facilitate care, but the disposition can be directed at strangers as well as intimates.”

In this way, Carried and Held transverses the separation between private and public dependency, demonstrating the care that takes place within the conventional networks of familial kinship and convivial relations as well as the anonymous and unattached aid that occurs in random, fleeting moments. Moreover, the documentation on the courtesy line functions as the only evidence for these acts of care; the vertical label does not accompany any sort of object, existing instead as the object itself. This adds, then, to the tension between private and public, affective and unattached, in that the specifically identified figures may hold significance for the artist, but not necessarily for the viewer reading the names. Imagination, however, can take hold for the helpful strangers, constructing a scenario in which interactions may have taken place.

Carried and Held relates more broadly to the notion of a care collective, which McArthur uses to describe the network of kinship originating outside of the nuclear family and unpaid caregivers from within her social networks. This practice stems from feminist and political movements in recent decades which recognized the necessity of care, namely in the form of childcare, as a mechanism for support. In the essay “Sort of Like a Hug,” McArthur describes her first experience receiving care from someone other than a family member or paid attendant at

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the 2010 US Social Forum. Even though the care occurred in a collective, group-negotiated setting, nevertheless those who most regularly interacted with McArthur already shared an emotional closeness with her. This positionality extends to the care collective, as well. The participants of the collective come from circles with which McArthur has loose affiliations. In 2011, she circulated emails, Facebook messages, and announcements online, soliciting care in exchange for money or services if more than two hours of labor could be provided. With seven friends and ultimately two strangers resulting from these solicitations, the people in the care collective reflect the groups with whom McArthur most associates and relates--white adults in their 20s or 30s, artists or academics.

Situating McArthur centrally, the care collective functions in relation to her life, “around which additional needs, desires, and force fields orbit and pull.” This dynamic reflects the contingency that characterizes Carried and Held; akin to the way in which the duties of her caregivers shift depending on the needs and of the day, likewise Carried and Held changes in each iteration. Not only does the list of names expand with the progression of time, but the formatting of the wall label must conform to the standards of the institution in which it is displayed. The self-referentiality of Carried and Held also relates to the use of the list in Conceptual art, for example Dan Graham’s Schema from 1966-1970 [Image 6]. Rather than a museum label, Schema utilizes the magazine page; the layout and format, like Carried and Held, depends upon the publication in which each iteration appears. Moreover, the information printed on the page corresponds to the data of the publication itself, such as “(Number of)
adjectives…(Percentage of) area not occupied by type…(Perimeter of) page…” and so on. Like
the seemingly endless list of names in Carried and Held, the specifications detailed in Schema
are lengthy and pedantic. The similarities between these works further demonstrate McArthur’s
engagement with Conceptual art as she produces her own work, as is also the case for Morris’s
Card File, discussed in the previous chapter. Yet, unlike the moments of affect interspersed in
the names, such as the anonymous figures who are documented, Schema is self-described as
arbitrary. The production of an art object like Carried and Held from McArthur’s experiences of
care challenges the assertions that dependency belongs to the private domain.\textsuperscript{33} Nevertheless, as
discussed previously, the use of text as opposed to images to document these relations allows for
a certain level of anonymity and privacy to be retained, despite the public display. This medium
grants an encompassing record of caregivers, both in a general sense as one name among many,
and citing specific moments where two strangers interact.

Carried and Held is a living work, capturing a period of time which grows with each
iteration. In contrast, It’s Sorta Like a Big Hug, a 19-minute long video from 2012, records a
brief interaction between McArthur and Constantina Zavitsanos, a collaborator and member of
the care collective. The unedited video depicts the two in a bedroom, McArthur seated in an
unseen wheelchair and Zavitsanos leaning into her. Focusing on the two people’s torsos, both
their heads and legs are cropped out of frame. Zavitsanos and McArthur prepare to come into
contact, wrapping their arms around each other so that Zavitsanos can lift McArthur into bed. An
audio description of the video describes this action as being done “cautiously and tenderly,”
emphasizing the intimacy of the moment as well as the attention to each other’s well-being.\textsuperscript{34} A

\textsuperscript{33} Kittay, “The Ethics of Care, Dependence, and Disability,” 53.
\textsuperscript{34} Audio Description of It’s Sorta Like a Big Hug, from What Can a Body Do? at Haverford College, 2012.
still from the video at timestamp 16:53 depicts McArthur lying horizontally on the bed, which appears unmade and topped with various blankets and sheets [Image 7]. McArthur is wearing an olive green t-shirt, which appears ripped at the side seam, revealing her stomach, and blue-green pajama pants with a snowflake pattern. She lies on her back, with her head on a pillow and her arms crossed over her chest and holding her hands. The camera captures the scene from an angle, positioned near the head of the bed, but askew to capture most of the bed’s length. Thus, McArthur looks away from the camera, smiling with her mouth open and her eyes directed to the other person in the scene, presumably Zavitsanos. This other person, wearing a gray jacket over a colorful sweater and black pants, sits on the bed with McArthur, positioned with back against the wall but legs bent and crossed over McArthur’s outstretched body. The two people’s legs seem intertwined, mimicking the way in which they grasped each other earlier in the video. Compared to Carried and Held, this video takes a different approach to the experience of dependency, demonstrating the ways in which relationships involving dependency and the labor of care exist in the context of intimacy and concern for one another’s well-being, as well as the coexistence of other, chosen kinships. It places significance upon this everyday act performed by the two of them, also, because of its recording. This significance is further emphasized by the scores written to accompany tasks such as the one depicted in It’s Sorta Like a Big Hug. One such example, titled SCORE FOR LIFT AND TRANSFER, describes the steps involved in this kind of undertaking: “Work to deliver your bodies safely from platform to platform, surface to surface...Stand and hold yourself while holding someone else.” This text, in addition to the video, provides an insight into the complicated ways that care is performed by framing these actions as performance. Indeed, these scores cite the event scores used by the group Fluxus,

35 Park McArthur, Still from It’s Sorta Like a Big Hug, Digital Video, 2012, 16:53
wherein actions are described in a manner akin to scripted dialogue. Staged and described step-by-step, more consideration is granted to tasks that otherwise appear mundane and easy. Moreover, this treatment of care grants access into a private moment, thrusting it into public view.

The stills from *It’s Sorta Like a Big Hug* evoke other images of dependency from the private realm, such as AA Bronson’s photograph *Felix Partz, June 5, 1994* [Image 8]. This cropped photograph depicts Partz hours after his death from AIDS-related illness. Like the still described above, this image captures its subject lying in bed, tucked in and laying on a pillow. Various blankets with clashing patterns and brightly colored pillows surround Partz, whose ashen, emaciated body lays in a black-and-white psychedelic-print shirt. His gaunt, sunken in eyes stare directly at the camera and his mouth remains slightly open, revealing his decayed teeth. Depicted in a domestic setting, the photograph feels voyeuristic; the viewer confronts Partz’s body within his own bed, put on display even after his death, taking the place of a loved one who would be mourning this loss. It grants access to the final moments someone might have after a drawn-out death. Not only does the photograph capture a single moment in time, but the subject matter also denotes a fleeting moment, a time of transition between life and death at the end of a horrible illness. Taken by AA Bronson, a friend and former collaborator of Partz as part of the collective General Idea, as well as a part of Partz’s network of friends and caregivers who looked after him through the course of his illness. This image further publicizes what usually remains private, emphasized even further by the monumental size of the print. Though it may

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seem objectifying, exploiting Partz's illness even in his death and making a spectacle out of his body, the photograph intends to grant the viewer some insight into the domestic, everyday life of Partz as an AIDS patient. Consequently, the viewer confronts the reality of Partz’s illness and subsequent dependency, but can do so in a way that is more empathetic and humanizing. By contextualizing Partz’s experience, using his own death bed covered in brightly colored linens and covered by his personal belongings, the viewer can understand the processes and dynamics of illness without the need to imagine what that could look like.

McArthur’s works discussed in this chapter, in conjunction with the photograph by AA Bronson, function to bring the mechanisms of dependency into the public realm. Focusing on the interpersonal relations of dependency and caregiving, the interactions between people become the focus, centering on the relationships that emerge from that kind of intimacy (or lack thereof, as is the case with the anonymous people in Carried and Held.) These works more directly engage with the actions of dependency, but McArthur also involves the aftermath as a subject for her artworks. One such example is Blue Snowflake Commode from 2014 [Image 9] . Consisting of a stainless steel stand and a pair of the artist’s used pajama pants, in this work McArthur puts on display the evidence of her dependency. The blue pajama pants, which hang from the linear stand by a torn, elastic waistband, appear as a discarded belonging. Obviously used, as denoted by the rip in the waistband and the faded and discolored white snowflake pattern that decorates the light blue fabric, these pants demonstrate the sometimes destructive consequences of caregiving. By displaying this item of clothing, which would normally be thrown away or at the very least kept inside the home for private use, McArthur finds a balance between the tattered characteristics of the pajama pants and the sleek, modernist form of the steel stand.
Though not necessarily grotesque, the dinginess of the clothing still evokes a certain repulsion on the part of the viewer, as if they stumbled upon the artist’s dirty laundry before it could be hidden away. McArthur’s display of her own used pants evokes the work of Conceptual artist Mary Kelly in the work *Post-Partum Document*, from 1973-79.\(^{38}\) In this, Kelly keeps tedious records of her son’s activity and development from his birth until the age of five.

Differing from *Carried and Held* due to the fixed timespan and the variety of behaviors documented, *Post-Partum Document* centers the experience of the caregiver, Kelly as a mother, over that of the dependent. Rather than conforming to a single medium for this documentation, Kelly instead explores various different topics and actions for the subject other work. Some of the artifacts she uses include clothing, in addition to more analytical charts recording her son’s actions. Combining the dry, scientific records with her son’s clothing, such as dirty diapers, Kelly incorporates affect into otherwise objective information. One such example includes the rectangular piece of beige cloth, stained with her son’s fecal matter, along with a black text that documents his food intake [Image 10]. Similar to *Carried and Held* and even Graham’s *Schema*, the text on this diaper assumes a kind of standardized format creating a consistency amongst the unpredictable stains. While used cloth diapers shock and disgust the average viewer more than dirty, ripped pajama pants, both items nevertheless transgress the barriers between private life and public display, putting the personal on display. Like McArthur’s documentation of caregivers in *Carried and Held*, or the display of her pajama pants in *Blue Snowflake Commode*, the aesthetics of Minimalist and Conceptual get incorporated with objects which hold sentimental value only for the artists themselves.

McArthur’s engagement with dependency as both a concept and a lived experience occurs in a realm between the private and the public. Interacting with her experience of dependency through objective modes, such as the documentation of *Carried and Held*, she puts it on display in such a way that is contingent upon her own memories, yet remains largely indecipherable to the viewer. Dependent upon her own understanding and conceptualization of being disabled, the information that McArthur shares is specific to her and the people who provide her care, centering her own experiences as the main source of ‘data.’ Moreover, this dynamic of dependency is embraced as a source of information, producing not only documentation and imagery, but also evidence in the form of personal belongings which display the traces of physical interaction and intimate tasks. Thus, appealing to the experiences of the viewer becomes unnecessary; these works speak to McArthur’s own epistemology of dependency and care.
CHAPTER 3
ACCESSIBILITY

From January 12 to February 24, 2014, the gallery space at ESSEX STREET in New York City was occupied by some twenty different ramp structures as part of Park McArthur’s exhibition entitled Ramps [Image 11]. Arranged in a grid-like formation which extends from the left wall of the gallery, the ramps allow very little space for navigation, occupying nearly the entire floorspace. The various materials from which each ramp is constructed makes apparent the effort put into the accessibility they grant. Ranging from actual durable medical equipment (such as the foldable metal ramps with black surfaces for traction and yellow details for visibility) and sturdy wooden structures to sheets of plywood and wood scraps (such as the single piece of wood leaning vertically against the wall), the quality of the ramps’ materials varies drastically. Though all of the ramps included in the installation are portable, having been borrowed from various institutions across the city, it becomes quite obvious to a viewer which ones were intentionally made or purchased and which were a quick, makeshift solution for an inaccessible environment. While in their original contexts these ramps make for a more inclusive and welcoming space, displayed together in the gallery, they create a context of hostility. Though an able-bodied viewer may be able to traverse the room easily, walking along the wall opposite of the ramps and even going through the small spaces in between them, anyone who uses a mobility aid such as a scooter or wheelchair, a blind visitor, or a visitor with low vision would have
difficulty navigating the labyrinthian space if they were able to access it at all. These tools for accessibility, then, function paradoxically when grouped together in the gallery, turned into obstructive objects for disabled visitors and inverting their original function as makeshift attempts to render spaces accessible.

Collected in the months leading up to the exhibition, McArthur named each ramp after its lending institution, with titles such as *Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture*, (2012) and *Whitney Independent Study Program*, (2013). Those without named institutions are identified instead by their material, including *brown with tape* (2011) and *white with scratches* (2013). These ramps and their titles refer to the instances in the preceding years in which McArthur had to deliberately request access to art institutions. In a 2014 interview with Jennifer Burris for BOMB Magazine, the artist describes the exhibition as “a show composed of these temporary fixes to structures that are ultimately inaccessible and will remain inaccessible...” Indeed, the collection of ramps on display in this small space makes apparent the number of inherently inaccessible spaces the artist had encountered in the years between 2010 and 2013 prior to this exhibition’s opening, a timeline marked by her move to New York City. In place of these ramps, all of which were built or purchased primarily for McArthur’s use, she insisted that the lending institutions put on display signs in the standard blue and white shades, reading “RAMP ACCESS LOCATED AT ESSEX STREET”, so that disabled visitors could still have access to those places [Image 12]. She notes after the exhibition’s opening that no institution ever contacted her to use the ramps, noting that this could be because people did not know about the ramps, despite

the signs, or that no one had complained and, thus, nothing was done.\textsuperscript{41} However, the steps necessary to reacquire these ramps also poses a significant obstacle in gaining access to a site. Not only does requesting these ramps back temporarily delay access, but it necessitates the resources to transport a ramp back and forth between the two locations. Thus, this kind of indirect accessibility could have deterred anyone from inquiring further. The press release for the exhibition notes that the ramps’ “absence from their initially intended sites conforms to the general absence of access at every other cultural and physical institution we attend.”\textsuperscript{42} Moreover, McArthur’s actions in removing and hoarding the ramps reinforce that exclusion, contributing to the labor needed to ensure institutional accessibility.

The way in which McArthur draws these connections between institutions references John Knight’s 1998 exhibition \textit{Identity Capital} at American Fine Arts, once again demonstrating her engagement with Conceptual art practices [Image 13]. In this show, Knight similarly borrows his objects, but this time from restaurants as opposed to art institutions. These restaurants became the hosts for after-arts events, once again highlighting this relationship between the two locations, the gallery and the lending institution in the context of the art world. Instead of ramps, Knight asks that the restaurants donate their bouquet arrangements leftover from events, and in return gives them a card to display, thus sanctifying the relationship between the establishments. Like the signs used by McArthur, though more explicit, these cards announce his exhibition, directing the viewer there in order to see the arrangements. In both instances, the Knight’s cards and McArthur’s signs both mediate the viewer’s interaction with the objects which have been transformed into artwork for display, acting as intermediate agents between the two locations, as

\textsuperscript{41}Ibid.
well as between the viewer and the objects. Moreover, both elevate the value of these objects; however, Knight utilizes floral arrangements which, though temporary and disposable, are intended for admiration and display, whereas McArthur brings attention to ramps that are otherwise looked over, especially by able bodied people. In both works, the artists highlight the insular world created in connection to art institutions, catering towards a specific demographic that excludes marginalized groups. For Knight, that demographic is complicit in the upscale capitalism that characterizes the lifestyle of many patrons in the city. McArthur, however, draws attention to the systemic marginalization that institutions take part in, which, by design, exclude disabled visitors, in addition to people of color, the working class, and other social groups. The hostile environment created by the inclusion of ramps within the gallery becomes evident when considering accounts from the exhibition itself. Instead of carefully navigating around the ramps, either walking in the small spaces in between them or moving down the intended walkway along the opposite wall, the normally conscious and well-mannered gallery visitors walked on top of the ramps and even jumped on them, leaping from one to another.43 Mirroring the implicit antagonism that occurs when ramps are absent from building entrances, the visitors seem to react aggressively to their presence, disregarding the norms of the gallery space.

As a result of the occupation on the part of the ramps, the gallery becomes a site for institutional critique; rather than utilize the ramps as a backdrop for interaction and engagement, McArthur fosters the tension between the objects and the audience, wherein the ramps dictate how the viewer interacts with the environment of the gallery. This pertains to the notion of antagonism that Claire Bishop explores in response to the concept of relational

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aesthetics, as coined by Nicolas Bourriaud in his 1998 book of the same title.\textsuperscript{44} Whereas Bourriaud identifies interactive art experiences, in which artists facilitate community dialogue and experience, as an alternative way for artists to communicate with the audience, Bishop recognizes the role of antagonism in experiential art in order to encourage critical, self-reflexive discourse.\textsuperscript{45} As mentioned previously, McArthur fuels this dynamic by producing a space in which the objects on display, the ramps, obstruct the usual interactions of the viewer. Instead of experiencing the exhibition through interaction with each other or with the art objects, the viewers’ experiences are instead shaped by the physical constriction of space resulting from the excessive number of ramps in the relatively limited space of the gallery. Moreover, by limiting the ways in which the audience can move around the gallery, the ramps not only occupy a position between the viewer and the gallery itself, but they also regain some autonomy in the process, asserting a power over the viewer as well as the gallery as part of that mediation. The ramps destabilize the subjectivity of the viewer, challenging the presence of an audience in the space by making that presence more difficult to maintain. Additionally, the arrangement of the ramps creates an actively hostile environment, especially for disabled visitors. While able-bodied visitors may be able to act out their aggression on the ramps through physical encounters, disabled individuals are limited in the ways that they can engage with the objects, if they are able to at all.\textsuperscript{46} By destabilizing the subjectivity of the viewer and sustaining tension between the

\textsuperscript{44} Bourriaud defines relational aesthetics as, “A set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.” Nicolas Bourriaud, \textit{Relational Aesthetics}, Les Presses Du Réel Edition (Dijon: Les Presse Du Réel, France, 1998).


\textsuperscript{46} This dynamic between disabled visitors and McArthur’s intentions as a disabled artist poses a difficult conundrum. In addition to the removal of temporary ramps, constructing a space that is actively inaccessible may seem counter to McArthur’s intentions. However, it raises the question about whether marginalizing a group of people is acceptable in order to make a point.
various components of the exhibition, McArthur, like the artists that Bishop discusses in her article, emphasizes antagonism and institutional critique.47

Looking over the ramps, displayed on the right wall of the gallery near the entrance, five blue and white rectangles line the top of the wall, inches away from the corner where the wall meets the ceiling. These rectangles, which are blank and blue with rounded corners, outlined with a white border that blends into the wall’s white color, mirror the form of the signs mentioned previously. This design refers to the international symbol of access, a blue square overlaid in white with a stylized symbol of a person using a wheelchair [Image 14]. The absence of text and the usual icon from these signs inside the gallery could be an intentionally minimalist design for the space, evoking Yves Klein’s monochromes and opposing the haphazard nature of the floor below [Image 15]. In this way, McArthur once again appropriates utilitarian objects, elevating them into art much in the same way she utilizes the ramps in the exhibition. Additionally, the blank signs further emphasize the inaccessibility of the space. Whereas the signs used to indicate the absent ramps function indexically, contingent upon the ramps themselves, the absence of information on the blue panels only highlights the inaccessibility of the gallery even more. Moreover, without the standard symbols and text, the visual reference made by these signs relies upon the viewer’s own familiarity with indicators of accessibility, catering towards an audience that does not usually occupy the focus of art exhibitions and, thus, centering that experience.

In addition to these signs a large, black text label on that same wall lists the hyperlink for a Wikipedia article dedicated to the American author and disability rights activist Marta Russell,

47 For example, Bishop discusses the work of Santiago Sierra (pg. 70-77), who centers issues such as class conflict, migration, and exploitative labor in his art “actions,” directly confronting the privileged audiences of art festivals with the social realities outside of those contexts.
who died in the month prior to the exhibition opening [Image 16]. Unlike a QR code or a text panel, the use of a hyperlink not only looks out of place in the gallery context, but also makes it so that a viewer must manually enter the text into an internet browser, actively engaging with the URL. Akin to the access granted by the ramps or the way the ramps affect the viewer within the gallery, the hyperlink stands in between the viewer and the information to which it leads. Instead of a guaranteed feature of the installation, the web page must instead be deliberately sought out. The title of McArthur’s exhibition makes a direct reference to Russell’s and her work, namely the 1998 book *Beyond Ramps: Disability at the End of the Social Contract*. With this book title, Russell calls attention to the needs of disabled people beyond the apparent requirement for physical access; she uses ramps to symbolize the contemporary approach to accessibility and rights, which readily accepted the challenges of physical change, such as building ramps, but failed to address the deeper, systemic issues of oppression. The overabundance of the ramps, which renders the gallery space effectively useless for the viewer, works to further emphasize this focus on physical change. By shifting resources to those efforts, as exemplified by the numerous ramps, instead of addressing the institutional problems that perpetuate inaccessibility in all of its forms, the lives of disabled people are ultimately made more difficult. While the previous chapters of this thesis address care in the private sphere, characterized by interpersonal relationships and actions that take place out of the public eye, Russell is concerned with the way that society as a whole treats disabled people. She describes disabled people as “canaries released into the coal mines to detect whether there was enough oxygen in the air to survive,” and, thus, identifies the experiences of disabled people as the first manifestations of inequity and

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oppression that will ultimately affect everyone. Hesitating to praise the advances of the recent decades, Russell instead calls attention to the implemented, while deeper, more systemic issues continue to be overlooked. The inclusion of Russell, both with the hyperlink and in the title of the exhibition itself demonstrates how McArthur works in dialogue with critical disability theory, in addition to her references to art history.

Elsewhere, McArthur also deals with the mechanisms of accessibility, such as in the 2013 photograph *How to get a wheelchair over sand* [Image 17]. This chromogenic print, measuring 8½ inches by 11 inches, captures the site of an outdoor campfire area, the ground of which consists of brown sand and is interspersed with leaves, sticks, and other debris. In the upper right corner of the image, seats made from wood stumps begin to reveal the area in which visitors can sit around a fire, while the remainder of the image centers on the ground that one must traverse in order to get there. As suggested by the title, the sheets of wood and other materials strewn on the ground function to allow McArthur’s wheelchair to move in the area, creating a path to the campfire. Some of these items stand out among the organic elements of the environment as obviously manmade and artificial, such as the sheet of wood near the seats that is marked with various colors of spray paint. Others, like the woven jute mat in the center of the image, blend into the sand and the forestry, creating a more seamless appearance. Nevertheless, in the background of the image, emerging from the top left side of the photograph, a hoard of wood and other discarded materials sits in a pile. The viewer can infer that the objects used to create the pathway originated from this collection, haphazardly assembled for temporary use. Like many of the ramps displayed in the exhibition at Essex Street, these flat objects demonstrate a makeshift

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solution for access. However, due to the nature of a photograph, their actual use is only implied. Traces of foot traffic appear in indentations in the sand, but it is difficult to tell whether or not a wheelchair actually travelled across this pathway sometime before the image was taken, or if that action will occur at a future time. Moreover, instead of creating an immediate opportunity to interact with these objects, like the viewers who walked across the ramps at the gallery, this photograph functions more so to inform the viewer of this interaction between McArthur and the space of the campfire site. The image focuses on the constructed pathway, which determines how McArthur or another wheelchair user could access the campfire area. Thus, it visually reproduces this track, placing the viewer at a beginning point of sorts and the wood stumps in the background, positioning the path in between. Then, the path not only dictates access to the site, but the photograph itself mediates how the viewer understands the pathway and so forth. Therefore, the image functions in order to communicate with the viewer an instance of inaccessibility, in which McArthur as a wheelchair user is initially excluded from a casual social interaction, and it works self-reflexively, demonstrating an instance of physical mediation through an object that, in itself, mediates visual communication.

The concepts of mediation and accessibility in care appeal more broadly to the way people and things interact with each other, as opposed to a direct interpersonal dynamic. It problematizes how people and things come into contact in the first place, taking a step back from their positioning as independent or dependent beings. Moreover, it places into question how access and care come about in the first place. Considering McArthur’s relationship with the care collective, in which they attend to her daily needs, McArthur is dependent upon the caregiver, thus positioning the caregiver as the intermediary between McArthur and the accommodations she requests. The relationship between the two individuals is one aspect of the dynamic of care,
and the role of the caregiver in meeting the needs and requests of the dependent is another factor of that relationship.
From Sunday, July 28th to Sunday, August 11th, 2013, the exterior of Essex Street in New York City was transformed for an installation [Image 18]. A temporary red awning was placed above the usual windowed facade, with the angled side of the overhand reading “Huan Ji Food Court Inc.” in white font with Hanzi written underneath. Additionally, a white sign with red lettering hangs below on the left side of the building front, making the name of the establishment visible to the passerby. On the part of the awning that runs parallel to the building’s front wall, a phone number is displayed in the middle of the red fabric, also written in white text. Aligned to the right of the number, an address in black overlaps the number “114” in white. Both the phone number and the address do not belong to the location at which this red awning has been displayed: the phone number leads to an actual restaurant by the same name of the fictional one at the installation, and the address belongs to a now abandoned building which had been the Nurses’ Residence and Training School of the Metropolitan Hospital system, opened in 1962. Hanging in the space below the red fabric, chains and multi-colored pennants in bright colors draw the eye to the covered area. Placed on the low-hanging chains, which drape from one end of the awning to the other, are various items of clothing, mostly black and white garments and some covered in dry cleaner’s plastic. Sourced from McArthur and other places, every day of the installation the clothes are hosed down with water, allowed to hang to dry until
they are once again sprayed with water the following day. This clothing further obscures the storefront, adding to the chaotic appearance of the closed-down space. The closed gallery and its haphazard exterior evokes the image of the *Ramps* discussed in Chapter 3, though in this instance the gallery has been made inaccessible to all visitors wherein *Ramps* mainly obstructs disabled visitors’ access. Black spray painted graffiti decorates the locked grey metal gate that hides the space behind these temporary features. Aside from the physical location, which previous visitors would know had housed Essex Street, no indicators of the gallery remain amidst the disarray at the site.

Staged by Park McArthur, the installation titled *During the Month of August Essex Street will be Closed* resists clear categorization. The amalgamation of objects put on display make it difficult to ascertain the intent behind the installation. Indeed, the information hidden in plain sight, such as the incorrect address printed on the outside of the building, necessitates a closer look. This kind of examination, a curiosity that must acknowledge one’s lack of knowing, encourages the viewer to think about what happens behind closed doors. If a potential visitor to the gallery, having encountered the altered exterior, visited the gallery website during this time, they would encounter a document titled “The Measure of a Society: Protection of Vulnerable Persons in Residential Facilities Against Abuse & Neglect”, authored by Clarence J. Sundram, the Governor’s Special Advisor on Vulnerable Persons for New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, in 2012. Sundram’s report “addresses the problem of abuse and neglect of vulnerable people in residential programs operated or supported by agencies of the state of New York.”

As a result of gaps in legislative policies and inconsistencies in regulatory framework, the report recognizes

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the neglect and abuse of these residents and provides recommendations for ensuring their safety, in addition to calling for systemic reform of state-supported residential facilities. Presented with this report alongside *During the Month of August*, the viewer is prompted to consider what occurs behind closed doors. Thus, the selective sharing of information with the public, such as in the exterior of a building or the official facade of a government facility, leads one to inquire what remains omitted from the public record. When this dichotomy of private and public affairs becomes complicated, blurring the distinction between them, vulnerabilities are exposed. Public entities are allowed to hide and avoid accountability while private affairs are forced into public view, thus enabling the possibility for neglect or abuse of the people for whom these institutions are meant to care and protect.

The issues brought up by the report relate further to McArthur’s Care Collective, as discussed in Chapter 2. In considering the faults in government institutions that are responsible for the care of disabled and other vulnerable peoples, alternatives to institutional care should be considered. Care Collective poses one such solution, on a small scale, where care is positioned as a communal activity, based upon an expanded understanding of kinship, that moves beyond a framework of exchange.\(^{51}\) Expanded beyond the scope of just McArthur, this kind of communal care relates to other issues of accessibility, such as affordable and accessible housing options, especially in a city like New York where neighborhoods see improvements to infrastructure like sidewalks and curb cuts alongside new construction in exchange for higher costs of living and fewer options for low-income or other affordable housing. McArthur addresses this conundrum, as well, in the exhibition *Projects 195: Park McArthur* at The Museum of Modern Art from

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October 2018 to January 2019. Set against the west-end expansion of the museum and a luxury apartment development above the museum, the exhibition works with this context, showing a stainless steel model that serves as an exploratory proposal for “a mixed-use building with artist studios, a public gallery, and below-market apartments for disabled and non-disabled people who mutually receive and provide care.” More than an imagined project, McArthur has put forward the abandoned building at 1918 1st Avenue as a “subsidized apartment building for care providers and receivers.” While these two projects can be connected in this way, whereas During the month of August addresses the time contemporaneous with the installation, and even looks to the past, Projects 195 confronts the present through an imagined future.

Arranged three times during the run of the exhibition, the components of STUDIO/HOME are cold and modular [Image 19], similar to the appearance of the minimalist objects described in Chapter 1. Without any sort of detail, or even totally closed forms, the objects are open and positionable, but also appear sharp and off putting. The industrial fabrication required to produce the models also aligns this work with other minimalist objects discussed previously in this thesis. Through the various configurations of the steel objects, they become more or less open to the viewer. In the second configuration, in which the components have been stacked on top of each other and placed in the corner of the gallery, the interior of the forms remains relatively concealed. Only openings between the different parts allow the viewer to observe and imagine the space within. This dynamic between the objects and the viewer, as well as the formal qualities of the model itself, evoke Donald Judd’s Untitled from 1982-86, an installation of 100 units of mill aluminum [Image 20]. Like another configuration of

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53 Press Release for During the Month of August
*STUDIO/HOME* [Image 21], these pieces have been installed so that they are spread throughout the space, making it so that the viewer must move in between them. However, whereas the individual parts of McArthur’s model are miniaturized, Judd’s sculptures relate more to the human body. Each measuring 41 by 51 by 72 inches, the encounter with these forms is more direct, with the viewer able to envision their own body in relation to the varying interiors. On the contrary, though *STUDIO/HOME* has the capability of occupying a large portion of floor space in the gallery, the viewer still towers over it, almost exerting a kind of power between the small-scale sculptures. The ability to reconfigure the components contributes to this experience, so that the viewer can manipulate the objects just as the museum and its surrounding environment is being manipulated. Additionally, the lack of identifying details and relative uniformity in *STUDIO/HOME* makes it easier to imagine the work outside of the gallery itself, transposed in a different scale and within a different context.

These references to an improved, minimalist future, however, include disabled people in that imagined time, a feature that is counter to a vision of the future in which disability is eradicated. Author Alison Kafer contends that one’s present understanding of disability, shapes the way that they envision the future, so that if disability is framed as “a terrible unending tragedy,” then it is something to be avoided. According to this ideology, then, a better future is not one that includes disability. Thus, in order to imagine a disabled futurity, the current ways that disability is characterized must be evaluated. Kafer advocates for an appreciation of disability “as political, as valuable, as integral.” This line of thought frames disability not as a fault or as a flaw of humankind or society, but rather as a lived experience and a social identity.

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56 Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 3.
In this way, the valuation of disability combats eugenicist ideology and the medical model of disability, both of which seek to eliminate disability through mechanisms of procreation or through technological cures and advancements.\(^{57}\) Considering a disabled futurity also implies centering the needs of disabled people, wherein an ‘improved’ society can better provide and care for those who have been historically marginalized. Martha Russell advocates for this kind of collective action in order to benefit the individual in her book writing, “We the people, including people with disabilities, must change the economic paradigms which greatly benefit the few, marginally benefit some, but leave others to some twisted, capitalist, social Darwinist end.”\(^ {58}\)

Looking to art and the way that care has been depicted historically, McArthur’s work provides insight not only on the embodied experience of being disabled, centering that perspective instead of the viewpoint of the care provider, but also on methods of community building around care practices. In this way, care is positioned as something that is more public and communal, providing a foundation for better means of providing care that shifts away from the conventional institutional settings. Instead, care relates not only to the topics of disability and subsequent physical or mental dependency, but also to the concern for one another’s well-being in terms of economic resources or housing. As a whole, a focus on care subverts the societal imperatives of self-sufficiency and autonomy, countering the negative connotations of dependency and framing care as an essential aspect of relational existence. This thesis has demonstrated how disability and, by extension, care as embodied experiences can inform art

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\(^{57}\) Both eugenics and the medical model of disability pose disability as a clear disadvantage to an individual. While both ideologies attempt to ‘better people,’ the latter does so through medical treatment, while eugenics aims to further the reproduction of desirable traits while preventing the reproduction of undesirable traits. The medical model treats disability after it occurs, while eugenics seeks to prevent it altogether.

making through the work of Park McArthur, expanding the scope of depiction of care in contemporary art and shifting the discourse to accommodate for alternative understandings of kinship.
ILLUSTRATIONS

Park McArthur
Carried and Held, 2021
Ink on paper mounted on Styrene board

SCHEMA

(number of) adjectives
(number of) adverbs
(percentage of) area not occupied by type
(percentage of) area occupied by type
(number of) columns
(number of) conjunctions
(number of) depression of type into surface of page
(number of) gerunds
(number of) infinitives
(number of) letters of alphabet
(number of) lines
(number of) mathematical symbols
(number of) nouns
(number of) numbers
(number of) participles
(perimeter of) page
(weight of) paper sheet
(type) paper stock
(thinness of) paper stock
(number of) prepositions
(number of) pronouns
(number of point) size type
(name of) typeface
(number of) words
(number of) words capitalized
(number of) words italicized
(number of) words not capitalized
(number of) words not italicized

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