

PRACTICES / PRATIQUES

Handle

with

Care

/Jillian Crochet/

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and performance to confront grief and disability.
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/fig. 1/ Jillian Crochet, *Resting Rocks*, 2022. Courtesy the artist and the Contemporary Jewish Museum. Photo: Impart Photography.

A pile of soft rocks, a grey that shifts like the clouds. Pleated seams create lines of oscillating color on lumpy, bodily objects filled with sand. The velvet bulges like the soft skin of fat-rolls. Surrogates for the disabled body. Asking to be held. These objects are sculptures but they are more than that to me; they are comfort organisms. They hold the weight of my uncontainable grief. I hand one to you as a way for me to communicate—to transfer the unspeakable from my body to your body—to soothe. Shifting their accumulation marks time passing, their sprawled (or slumped) horizontality predicts formless futures. The *Resting Rocks* lie on the floor, like a pile of exhausted bodies in repose or a heap of stones marking a grave.

My 2022 work *Resting Rocks* was commissioned for *Tikkun: For the Cosmos, the Community, and Ourselves* at the Contemporary Jewish Museum (CJM) in San Francisco, California. This installation is made up of a plethora of individual rock-shaped objects made of varying shades of grey silk velvet, filled with sand. I affectionately call these smooshy stitched-velvet comfort organisms “lumpies.” They range in size and weight from fetus to large body. There are around thirty-eight total which equal somewhere around 800 pounds of sand. Some can be picked up and cradled, but the larger ones weigh nearly 200 pounds.

The lumpies use tactile and embodied aesthetics to challenge the hierarchy of the senses.¹ Velvet, rich in color and so soft that it’s almost impossible to resist touching it. So seductive that your hand moves unconsciously to touch before your thoughts reach your fingertips. The way they feel against your skin, the weight and movement of the objects when you hold them, creates a phenomenological mind-body connection.² I argue that this is more primal and complex than ocularcentric perception.³

But more importantly, touch is a necessary element to the full, rich—and accessible—experience of art. In “The Art of Touch: Lending a Hand to the Sighted Majority,”⁴ Georgina Kleege outlines essential techniques and key infrastructural and foundational changes needed by institutions to create more inclusive accessibility through touch. She urges for the “substantial rethinking of museum facilities and a diversification and democratization of institutional hierarchies.” She insists that integrating touch into the everyday museum experience would increase accessibility and appreciation for all.

But because we don’t have a lot of experience with touch in museums, integrating touch and accessibility can get complicated—and messy. Even within the careful thoughtful context of repair, people tended to be quite aggressive with *Resting Rocks*, throwing them and even attempting to move the large, 200-pound ones that were barely holding it together. Putting the lumpies in a museum was a new experiment for me. The abandonment of care and respect for touchable artwork can be attributed to a lack of language for and experience with touch and embodiment by both institutions and individuals— due in part to Western ocularcentrism.⁵ We are taught what not to touch more than how to touch. It is as though there is an abandonment of restraint, respect...or *care*,⁶ as this primal sense unleashes and dominates the body without any prior nurturing or learned parameters.

1 Aristotle’s *De Anima* (On the Soul), 350 B.C. Aristotle’s hierarchy of the senses relegated touch to the most primitive, least important way of knowing the world. This ocularcentric perception is still perpetuated in the West, where vision is prioritized as the most important way to understand and interact with the world. Sight is deemed the highest of the senses, followed in order by hearing, smell, taste, and touch. This dictates the privileging of sight, in the museum and beyond.

2 Abby Wilkerson, “Embodiment,” in *Keywords for Disability Studies*, ed. Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 68. Feminist phenomenology understands embodiment “as a form of subjectivity that is manifested bodily, a ground of intentional activity and the means of encountering the world.”

3 Prioritization of vision.

4 Georgina Kleege, “The Art of Touch: Lending a Hand to the Sighted Majority,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 20, no. 2 (2021): 433–51, DOI: 10.1177/14704129211026298.

5 Amanda Cachia, “Sweet Gongs Vibrating,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Disability Arts, Culture, and Media*, ed. Bree Hadley and Donna McDonald (New York: Routledge, 2019), 204.

6 I hesitate to even use the word “care” since it is so often used in institutions as a “current” topic—but it is hardly ever practiced in a real way. As an action. As a value. As a commitment to change, to transformation. A commitment to doing better.

I might have expected this, after researching touch extensively. Amanda Cachia's writing describes how her curatorial project *Sweet Gongs Vibrating* had similar breakages due to aggressive touch. Cachia warns that viewers turned participants are very rough with objects they can touch, and broke artwork in this exhibition. She calls for a "lexicon of touch" in order to teach participants appropriate touching engagement. But I was still kind of shocked by the continual abuse of the lumpies. It felt abrasive and, at times, defeating—like yet another instance of society's unrelenting, inhumane treatment of the disabled body. For example, there are inaccessible stairs all over the Bay Area, but sometimes they still catch me off guard—and piss me off—when they impede my plans. Inaccessibility is *exhausting*.

As complications arose around *Resting Rocks*, I was reminded of the rigidity of institutions towards trouble-shooting. This is just the way disabled bodies operate: plans are constantly shifting and changing. Modifications are necessary for us to be able to survive within an ableist world not built for us. We expect it. But we can't get used to it. We shouldn't be forced to accept inaccessibility. Disabled people need to be included and valued. Art institutions need to integrate accessibility into every level of the art experience. But how do we integrate touch and accessibility when institutions resist change? How can we challenge the institution to get comfortable with the mess that comes with trying to figure it out? And how do we include, support, value, and care for all bodies—especially the messy disabled ones?

BACK TO TOUCH

Lumpies are meant to be touched and held. I started making these objects due to my own sensory-related disabilities. I experience the duality of the loss of sensation and the pain of hypersensitivity. Sensory information can be overwhelming and painful. I find refuge in nature, cold sand, warm baths, and soft textiles. I was drawn to the sensorial pleasure of silk velvet and sand. Similar to a weighted blanket, the lumpies can provide comfort and embodied grounding. You can stroke them, smooch them, and they move in endless ways that can provide stim. Touch can be a way to "stim"—short for self-stimulation, which can be an action one does to self-soothe, to help one focus, or to distract from pain or over-stimulation and sensory overload, among other things. Stim can be a crucial processing tool for autistic and neurodivergent people, but also able-bodied people. We are often taught not to stim as children—through rather cruel means—to control and "normalize" bodies.

I feel that touch, an embodied way of understanding, is deeply intuitive and more complex than visual stimuli alone. I deeply identify with the Brazilian artist Lygia Clark, who believed perception to be "somatosensory," an unconscious and pre-verbal experience connecting the senses through the nervous system to memory deep within the psyche.

Sight, smell, and hearing require the body to become involved in its deepest dimensions, down to the 'nervous system', which is made up of the internal or the visceral environment, the proprioceptive or kinesthetic apparatus (which exists even when there is no motion), and the sense of touch at skin level.⁷

My work seeks to communicate through primordial awareness—the innate and nebulous that is so familiar it is unknown. Knowing that shapeshifts and

7 Christine Macel, "Lygia Clark: At the Border of Art," in the exhibition catalog *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment of Art*, ed. Sergio Bessa and Briony Fer (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 255.



/fig. 2/ Jillian Crochet, *Resting Rocks* (pile), 2022. Courtesy the artist.
Photo: Minoosh Zomorodinia.



/fig. 3/ Jillian Crochet, *Resting Rocks* (patch detail), 2022. Courtesy the artist.

exists as many things at once. I use the word *primordial* to describe a way of knowing formed at the beginning of time, and therefore the beginning of the body: something so instinctive within ourselves that we struggle to find the words to describe it, to understand it, for it came before words. But we *feel* it.

When I hand a lumpy to a viewer they immediately become engaged as a participant, and their understanding shifts visibly as their body sags under the unexpected weight—the body falters like it might under the shock of deep and heavy grief. Participants note that after holding one for a while, it becomes comforting, like a weighted blanket. Embodied perception, according to Abby Wilkerson, is emotion and feeling in the body. “Seen through the lens of disability studies, embodiment frames bodily change as a horizon for self-understanding and self-definition, and the body as an agent interacting with others and with the world and more generally.”⁸ I use touch to explore oscillating modes of relating to the world, and each other, through the disabled body, emotion and empathy.

THE MESS

As they exist in relation to human bodies—touched, held, moved—the delicate silk velvet fails to contain the heavy sand and busts at the seams. These sculptures leak like living organisms that need to be cared for. Like our leaky bodies, with repetitive handling and misuse, they require mending, often.

Like human skin and disabled bodies, lumps are fragile—this is integral to the work. I spend a lot of time repairing them, healing their wounds, as did the curators and other staff members. Tending to them is a repetitive act, like tending to my own pain. Mending is the embodied, physical act of care. But even with mending, like our own leaky bodies, the mess is inevitable.

All bodies require constant care, but tending to our bodies is often a hidden activity, carried out in private. It’s sensual and taboo. Through my work—tending to the tears by mending, but also through highlighting our need for touch—I am normalizing the need for caring for one’s body, and other bodies. Normalizing the display of pain—and the soothing of pain—in public. Normalizing the disabled body that does not “behave” according to social norms and “etiquette.” Normalizing the mess, and by mess I mean that which is often hidden away, pertaining to our (all) bodies from emotions and feelings, everything that physically leaks from a body—in addition to clutter and “disorganization.” Crip beings and spaces are messy, as in we can’t always hide that which comes with a leaky body, we may not be “on time,” we function outside of the social “norm.” People are *uncomfortable* with disabled bodies because we confront their own proximity to disablement and death. Yet, all bodies will be disabled.

Lumps are ungovernable and messy, like our disabled bodies. Throughout the time *Resting Rocks* was in the museum, I was reminded how uncomfortable the public and the museum can be with mess. For me, sand leaking on a museum floor is minor on the spectrum of what messy could be, it is subtly pernicious—but it was treated as a continual “problem.” I admit, I struggle with internal ableism about my own crip messes: my spills and stains, the disorganized chaos that is my desk and studio. I write and share this in an attempt to destigmatize, reckon with, and affirm my mess. When the lumps began leaking it was overwhelmingly apparent how problematic the “mess” is for institutions, which insist on the clinical preservation of objects to maintain value and uphold rules, guidelines, and an overwhelming bureaucracy, which I find produces both the control and exhaustion of my body.

This is at the heart of the labour politics of care. The hierarchies of labour and value in our society dictate that physical labour is not valued



/fig. 4/ Jillian Crochet, *Resting Rocks* (mending), 2022. Courtesy of the artist.
Photo: Minoosh Zomorodinia.

the same way as white-collar labour.⁹ In the West, grief work—mending/repair—is often invisible feminine labour expected to be done at home—in private.¹⁰ On top of that, institutional departmentalization is inflexible and makes troubleshooting complicated. The institution's proposed solution was for me to remake all of the lumpies with lining so that they wouldn't leak...or to take the large messy ones out of the show. This sends the message that disabled bodies are too messy to be in the museum—that they need to either be hidden away or made to fit in.

For me, the conversation in the museum became a mirror to how our government/society undervalues care for disabled people and their care workers. Care workers provide life-sustaining care for disabled people, and low wages set by the state put us in constantly vulnerable positions without the adequate care we need. We need to make these kinds of unseen labour transparent—and valued—the labour of mending/caring for the body.

The museum, as any institutional space in our built environment, is often inhospitable and exclusionary towards disabled bodies. These antagonistic relationships, when highlighted against the backdrop of the white wall, lay bare inequities in social structures rooted in capitalism. When the museum is quick to “clean up” and get rid of the mess, how can we push back against this unrelenting sanitization?

Make no mistake, the curator was an amazing advocate, but pushing back on institutions that are innately white supremacist, ableist and deeply entrenched in the structure built to keep out “the other” is grueling emotional labour. In future iterations of this work, I hope being made aware of my access needs—and those of the work—might prepare the institution to budget necessary expenses. However, I get nervous that institutions might shy away from hosting work by disabled artists due to the financial cost of creating equitable access. “Too expensive” isn't an acceptable reason to exclude disabled artists and/or the public from multiple forms of access.

Disabled people should be included and valued. Our perspectives and the way we see the world are important. And no matter how thoughtful and caring the team—which they were—it's going to take a lot of education, a lot of dismantling, and a lot of labour to change things. In future iterations of my work, there are a few precautions I would like to implement to try and protect myself and care for the work. I would make an Access Rider¹¹ for myself and the work, including consultant fees for advocacy labour and repair labour fees.¹²

I know advocacy and tangible care is the work of this work—a lot of my work. But it is often invisible labour. And it's *exhausting*. I want to share my behind-the-scenes, because that's the stuff I/we need to hear. But we are working in a scarcity framework, where we might lose opportunities if we speak up or against an institution. We might be labeled as a “difficult” artist and shadow-banned into silence, so we stay quiet to be “seen.” So nothing changes, and we are exhausted and depleted. But we can't afford to not look at what needs to change—to hide it away.

9 This can once again be traced all the way back to Aristotle's *De Anima*: Aristotle's hierarchy of the senses ranks both the labour classes and women as lesser.

10 Heightened during the Age of Reason/Enlightenment, the masculine “sense of sight has traditionally been linked with the highly valued faculty of reason — intellectual vision.” Women and peasants were relegated to “the lowly sense of touch... associated with mere physical sensation — the ‘mindless’ pleasures and pains of the body.” Constance Classen, “The Senses,” *Encyclopedia of European Social History*, Encyclopedia.com, November 13, 2019, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/international/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/senses>.

11 A contract used by disabled artists to create boundaries with institutions to insist upon the protection and care of the disabled

artist. Alice Wong and Johanna Hedva provide helpful templates, among others. See Johanna Hedva, “Hedva's Disability Access Rider,” *Sick Woman Theory* (blog), August 22, 2019, <https://sickwomantheory.tumblr.com/post/187188672521/hedvas-disability-access-rider>; and Alice Wong, “Alice Wong — Access Rider” (PDF), *Disability Visibility Project*, https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/2023-Access-Rider_Alice-Wong_042923-Remediated.pdf.

12 I often end up doing free advocacy labour as well as the physical labour of repair, on top of the labour of making the work. Artist labour is often unpaid, or not enough, usually barely covering materials.

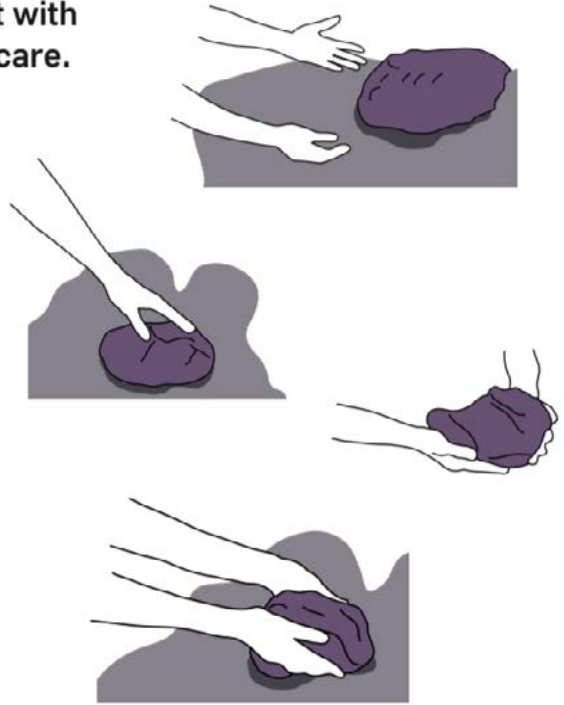
The artist invites visitors to interact with *Resting Rocks*. Please handle with care.

Approach the *Resting Rocks* slowly and considerately

Touch the rocks tenderly

If you wish to pick one up, support it from the bottom with both hands

Gently return the rock back to the pile



/fig. 5/ Jillian Crochet, *Resting Rocks*, 2022, instructions for care. Courtesy the artists, Charlie Lederer, and The Contemporary Jewish Museum.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR CARE

Due to all the excited touchers, the lumpies kept breaking at the seams, so as a compromise with the institution's impulse to put up signs that said "Do Not Handle Aggressively," I wrote a score for how to touch. I did not want to scare or thwart people from touching with institutional language and rules, as Cachia had undesirably experienced. Because people don't have experience touching in museums, we must teach people *how* to touch, something all the touch scholars and artists referenced in this essay and I agree on. So I carefully chose the words for "instructions for care," which was placed next to the work, with an amazing graphic cartoon illustrated by Charlie Lederer of the CJM. But of course, that wasn't enough. Children still threw the lumpies across the room. People still handled them aggressively. Once, in barely more than the time it took me to enjoy lunch with some disabled colleagues, the installation turned into a site of destruction. I think next time the instructions will have to be forcefully but softly emanating from the sky, like an omnipotent God. Partially for accessibility, partially because people just don't read the text.

In the future, to increase accessibility and careful touching, the text and pictograms for the "instructions for care" would be large and confrontational and there would be audio of me reciting this score. An appropriately paid care-worker would perform routine repairs and maintenance instead of perpetuating cycles of unpaid disabled-artist labour and/or taking advantage of blue-collar support staff. I thought the security guards' presence would thwart aggressive touch. But the institution would need to pay for extra training or work required by the security guards, or hire, as Cachia puts it, an "interlocutor,"¹³ someone on staff who can instruct the visitors on the care of touch. Kleege also suggests hiring and training "touch docents." This kind of training was implemented into work that Carmen Papalia and Whitney Mashburn convened for the show *In Plain Sight*, which they participated in at the Wellcome Collection in London. They brought in tactile work by collaborators Fayen d'Evie, Katy West, and Kleege, and instructed docents on how to foster a careful touching experience, using a special key that could be checked out by visitors.

EMBRACING THE MESS

As a disabled person who holds a lot of grief and pain, working with materials I cannot control is a practice of confronting the uncontainable mess. I am messy—we are messy—everything bleeds together. My disability and my grief spills into every minute and every facet of my art. I exist in disorganized chaos. The lumpies are collective grieving organisms—they shed tears and leak ectoplasm. They are containers to hold the tactility of emotion in its dissonance and complexity: heavy and soft, soothing and uncomfortable, seductive and pernicious. They cannot move on their own, but cannot be fully controlled, a paradox inherent in the degeneration of my own muscle control. My temporal independence will deteriorate at a rate much faster than I'm willing to accept; therefore, my art practice is all the more urgent. Time rules my thoughts, as energy is rapidly depleted from my body by institutional red-tape, the medical-industrial complex, and my disability.

Resting Rocks is a work that is trouble-shooting and searching for ways to change the cycles of institutional harm that perpetuate ableism and exclude disabled people from participating in society. We need *actual* embodied care. We need to get messy and dig in to find solutions and try some new/uncomfortable ways of being. Not to do the same thing, because "that's how things are done." The rules capitalism insists on aren't interested in keeping our messy bodies alive. The lumpies will crack and rip and leak because *we* are a mess. Because the fragile mess is their—*our*—seductive power, what actually creates value.

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I would also like to note that I do not condone the position currently taken by The Contemporary Jewish Museum on the genocide taking place in Palestine—the horrific murder of hundreds of thousands of people by Israel and the United States is an unjustifiable crime against humanity and a Disability Justice issue.