

Crip Care of the Disabled Artist: Endurance Performance via Sculptural Objects

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Abstract

This paper will discuss how my Master of Philosophy Project explores the application of Cooley's theory of 'crip materiality' to studio practice. This theory posits that artworks can be considered 'crip' (a pejorative term reclaimed by disability studies theorists) through their material embodiment of disability. Cooley reframes artworks 'inherent vice' as disabled due to their material non-compliance, and the conservational and institutional structures they 'fail' in as inherently ableist. The intersection of my artistic practice and lived experience of disability gives a tangible significance to the concept of material failure. This paper will discuss how the key ideas of crip materiality might be translated into the contemporary art studio. In this new context, material 'failure', fatigue and vulnerability define the performing object as a surrogate for the artist's disabled body in works of endurance. In doing so, I both advocate for and scrutinise practices of care. In creating weak objects, I demonstrate what a crip material stoicism may look like without asking endurance of the disabled artist's body. I contend that if an object can appear fragile, weak, or tense enough to invoke a caring instinct within the viewer, then empathy for the chronically ill or disabled can follow.

Keywords: Care, Crip, Disability, Endurance performance, Sculpture

Introduction

This paper explores crip care as an element of my master's project, which applies Jessica A Cooley's framework 'crip materiality' to my own studio practice as a disabled artist with chronic pain. After laying the theoretical foundations for crip materiality and the broader area of research, I will then explain the three levels of care imbued in this method of making; care for self, care for materials and care for community.

Crip Materiality and Knowing-Making

Cooley's Crip materiality is one framework within crip scholarship in disability studies. 'Crip', from 'cripple', is a pejorative term that has been reclaimed by disabled people. In the seminal text Crip Theory, Robert McRuer likened this usage of crip to the maybe more familiar reclamation of the word Queer in Queer Theory to signify a radical critical stance

within gender and sexuality studies (McRuer, 2006). McRuer notes that crip, as only reclaimable by those with lived experience of disability, signifies the prioritising of embodied understandings of disability over mere representation of disability (McRuer, 2006). Critical Disability Studies has since adopted the term crip as signifying of the explicit rejection of assimilation into the institutions founded on the able-bodied norm (Lewis, 2015).

Crip, in the words of scholar Aimi Hamraie, is not merely a disabled standpoint, but the “specific commitment to shifting material arrangements” within society’s abled-bodied norm (Hamraie, 2023). Hamraie identifies an integrated approach as a ‘crip knowing-making’ that cannot be decontextualised or separated from this non-complacency with the current material norms (Hamraie, 2023). ‘Crip knowing-making’ identifies the inextricable nature of crip perspective from crip actions, emphasising that “crip knowing and being are inseparable from crip making and acting” (Hamraie, 2023). For me, this means the ways in which I work and think as an artist cannot be removed from my experience as a person with disability.

Returning to crip materiality, it is this notion of non-complacency with material norms that Cooley identifies within the institutions of the art world – in particular, conservation. Cooley studies cases across contemporary art history of the institutional treatment of works labelled as having ‘inherent vice’, or works that “degrade, corrode [or] disintegrate in ways that cannot be stopped or prevented by conservation science” (Cooley, 2021, Cooley 2022). The conservational convention of labelling works that are difficult to handle as having ‘inherent vice’ applies a moral judgement upon its material existence (Cooley, 2022). The non-compliance of the object reflects poorly on the object’s own value, as opposed to the systems around it that fail to meet its needs. Material failures, regardless of whether it aligns with the artist’s intent, are demonised, pathologised and isolated (Sandahl, 2013), a treatment Cooley identifies as akin to the way crip bodies are treated within institutional frameworks. When understood as representative of ableism more broadly, the assertion that the material ‘failures’ of the object are issues needing to be solved is equivalent to the medical model of disability, a now outdated understanding.

The social model of disability, more widely understood and accepted in recent years, asserts disability as socially constructed, given any person’s impairments only have the potential to become disabling due to failure to address additional needs of the person (or object) and any structural barriers that impact upon these needs (Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, 2019). Cooley therefore reframes the notion of ‘inherent vice’ as ‘crip materiality’-- where any inherent material non-compliance instead reveals failures in the systems around it.

However, Cooley’s crip materiality has so far only been applied retrospectively to artworks, particularly works within the post-materialist and minimalist sculptural movements of the 1960s and ‘70s. Cooley identifies that disability within art history has been primarily studied through three methodological approaches: biography, subject and style (Cooley, 2021). Art about disability was often not embodying disability, as is true to McRuer’s Crip Theory

assertion of embodiment over representation (McRuer, 2006), but instead was simply associated with disability, either through the artist's lived experience, the depiction of the disabled body, or a form of work accessible to or associated with disabled communities.

Application to Art Practice

My research aims to reframe 'crip materiality' as a methodological approach within studio practice. As opposed to identifying the incidental crip materiality of artworks previously unrelated to disability, I consider the rich material and contextual potential of reorienting materially crip behaviours as desirable outcomes from the studio process. In the tradition of post-materialist sculpture, I aim to collaborate with the non-compliance of the materials. This approach does not aim to cure material non-compliance in line with conservational notions of 'inherent vice', nor does it specifically aim to reform systems that inflict ableist constraints on the artworks, as proposed by Cooley. Instead, it values the knowledges gained by lived experience by embracing the methods learned to adapt to the ever-changing material reality of crip existence.

This active engagement with crip materiality separates my work from Cooley's theoretical framework, but more importantly reveals an underlying tension in my practice as an artist. My lived experience with persistent chronic pain and disability informs my own material understanding of the world, including the ways in which studio practice must be adapted to care for my body and needs. My 'crip knowing-making' is inextricably informed by the constancy of adapting and re-adapting, to material realities in my body and the environment around me. This has led to an investigation of a practice imbued with care, respecting my unique expertise gained through my lived experience with disability and chronic pain.

In approaching making artworks about care, I began with considering how pain has influenced the processes of other artists, as well as how my pain influences my making processes. Many notable artworks about pain are works that explore the endurance of the human body and approach the artist's body as "both the object and subject in relation to one's surroundings" (Nemser, 1971 in O'Brien, 2014; Jones, 1998). Martin O'Brien, a performance artist with cystic fibrosis, considers performance as a "space where endurance can be re-thought" (O'Brien, 2014). Using his own 'crip knowing-making' as a chronically- and terminally-ill artist, his performances work to unearth the everyday experience of endurance at the core of life with chronic illness (O'Brien, 2014). Martin explicates this as a distinct departure from the notion of choice in endurance performance art. Instead of choosing to orient the body as both the subject and object within the bounds of an artwork, endurance performance becomes a mode for unveiling the ways in which the disabled body complicates the subject/object binary in everyday life.

Crip Care in Artworks

I attempted this endurance style of performance work in an early career performance, *Pain Gloves (Crochet Performance)* (2022). Hand pain is a particular barrier for me in my processes and fluctuates unpredictably given different uses of my hands. Using plain cotton thread and a fine crochet hook, I began to crochet gloves for myself that directly responded to hand pain that worsened through the process. Through the process of crocheting, my hands and fingers began to cramp and ache, and these specific areas became the focus for where the glove should cover next. The work became a documentation of pain, as well as a documentation of the work itself, as the act of creating only exacerbated the base line pain that would have existed without crocheting. Akin to many endurance performances, the parameters of the work were predetermined and set around time limits, as the gloves were constructed over three twenty-minute sessions. In using my own subjective experience of pain, and my hands as an artist in general, as an objective reference point for the work, my specific experience of hand pain became the materiality of the work.



Figure 1: *Pain Gloves (Crochet Performance)*, 2022. Documentation. Artist's photo. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

As a standalone artefact, the gloves do align with disability, through their aesthetic value under the lens of Siebers' Disability Aesthetics (Siebers, 2010). The gloves cover only some parts of the hands and specific fingers, lacking consistency and symmetry. The gloves lack functionality as a practical garment, unlikely to provide any sort of warmth and comfort. The bodily alterity of missing fingers and the subversion of expected functionality both work to subvert conventional understandings of beauty and aesthetics; a contrast which Siebers notes is at the centre of modern aesthetic value for disability itself (Siebers, 2010).

However, as documentation of performance, the gloves themselves do not incorporate the endurance itself, and neglect the use of pain as a material. More importantly, the process of making this artwork actively worked to deny care of my body. The performance did not bear witness to crip endurance but demanded it. This denial of care encouraged me to explore Cooley's framework of crip materiality as a way to externalise endurance in ways that do not harm me, and thus, unlike *Pain Gloves*, align through material non-compliance alone.

A more recent work, *until it all subsides* (2023), prioritised replicating the act of crip endurance whilst caring for my body through the use of surrogate sculptures. The work was a temporal installation that performed over the seven days of my solo exhibition 'growing pains' at Wreckers Artspace in Woolloongabba in 2023. The work exists in four stages. Firstly, I constructed 24 two-tone discs made of soy wax, in reference to the number of separate vertebrae in the spine. At the beginning of each day, the discs were melted on extremely low heat. Once entirely melted, the wax was poured across clusters of ice sitting in a metal tray. As the wax and ice met, the wax cooled to a solid and the ice melted to water, leaving a negative impression of the ice within the wax. At the end of the day, the water had begun to evaporate, leaving behind the wax form that was then lined up on a plinth. The resulting forms were coral-like, the pooling and dripping of the wax becoming organic and irregular membrane lattices. As the exhibition progressed, the resulting sculptural installation accumulated.



Figure 2: *until it all subsides*, 2023. Documentation still. Photography by Louis Lim. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Layers of Care

By inflicting heat, cold, air, gravity and time upon the works, I subjected these wax forms to physical obstacles akin to that of a life with chronic pain. The pieces uphold a human-like stoicism through quietly withstanding these conditions, much alike an endurance performance work. However, this bodily tension is replicated in the object that can materially embody the same dynamics. In my case, the soy wax, due to its low melting point and malleability becomes a material surrogate for my body. Whilst the performance of the work required some level of activation by me, any demands of endurance is directed away from my own crip body. In opposition to the history of endurance performance art as embracing the subject, or artist's body, as object (Jones, 1998), this method aims to embrace the object as the subject, overlaying the sculptural form with a human and bodily subjectivity. This is an act of care for myself as the artist but, more importantly, the disabled artist.



Figure 3: *until it all subsides*, 2023. Documentation still. Photography by Louis Lim. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

I also enact a second level of care; care for materials. I follow the long history of post-modern sculpture's tendency with material collaboration, in the offering up of aesthetic agency to the materials. I support the wax's fragility, without constricting and restricting its natural inclination to crack, sag and soften. By moulding the works by hand and not using a casting method, each individual pour of wax is unique in its form as well uniquely responsive to the method of making. My 'crip knowing-making' is founded in expertise in how to continually manage, monitor and care for sensitive materials. By adapting, respecting and yielding to the materials, and their material non-compliance in the words of Cooley, I make attempts to understand and know the materials, and therefore care for them. This aligns with Donna Haraway's understanding of care as 'thinking-with', by considering materials and sculptural objects as more-than-human collaborators (Haraway in Hamraie, 2023).



Figure 4: *until it all subsides*, 2023. Documentation still. Photography by Louis Lim. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

The final layer of care lies in the intention of my works. Ultimately, I am drawn to such 'care-full' methods due to the potential I see within my works to transform understandings of the lives of people with chronic pain. Much of the understandings around living with disability is bracketed by a very hierarchical dynamic. The metanarrative, or general societal

understanding, of disability and chronic pain are entrenched in the clear distinction of experiences of those disabled and able-bodied (Bolt, 2021). This ideology of ability (Siebers, 2013) is founded in both the difference in one's phenomenological experiences of the world, but also the highly specific social location for people with disability who exist within a modern society that denies any bodily variation or irregularity (Garland-Thomas, 2005). This specificity of social location allows for a distance within interpersonal relationships, one often overcome with a hierarchy that leans heavily on othering. From pity-porn to inspiration-porn, crip bodies are often placed in the role of the other; somewhere on the ambivalent scale of the role of the miracle or the worst-case-scenario patient. The average able-bodied person does not scrutinise or even notice ableist barriers in their day-to-day life. Most often, it is the proximity to disability, working for, knowing or loving someone with disability, that brings disability to the forefront.

My practice continues to not explicitly depict the disabled or crip body. However, in embodying tensions of endurance, weightedness, tension, fatigue -- sensations everyone's bodies can relate to—I abstract the crip experience of chronic pain into a universal material stoicism. By taking my own crip body, as well as the depiction of any crip bodies or lives, out of the equation, I am redirecting the conversation away from highly specific narratives that require vulnerability from disabled populations. Instead, I aim to quietly assert these tensions as potentially a constant experience, for the materials or for disabled people such as myself. In using my 'crip knowing-making' expertise to care for the material objects in the same way I practice care for my own body, there is little room for hierarchy or othering, bridging the issue of proximity. I hope to encourage this same horizontality between the crip object and the audience, and even more broadly between able-bodied and disabled people. I contend that if an object can appear fragile, weak, or tense enough to invoke a caring instinct within the viewer, then empathy for the chronically ill or disabled can follow. Hopefully, by celebrating the stoic existence of crip materiality, I can encourage care not just for materials or individuals, but also a broader understanding and care for disabled and crip lives.

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