

**I HAVE THOUGHT A LOT ABOUT THIS:  
on the feelings of misfitting and the possibilities of softness**

by

Cait Kalb

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## Abstract

*I Have Thought A Lot About This* is an autoethnographic re-telling of my experiences as a neurodivergent person navigating academic institutions; the grief and the gift of being and doing non-normativity within the (often) hyper-normative structures of academia. Through the language of fitting and misfitting developed by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson alongside Sara Ahmed's exploration of queer orientations, I follow Judith Butler's insistence that the thought of a possible life is as crucial as bread for those of us who have never been able to imagine it. These theories are critical companions to the furniture objects designed and fabricated throughout this thesis. The Buddy Desk, Armchair, and Chest Cabinet ultimately offer a response to the guiding question— *how can we make the world a softer place?*

## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I authorize OCAD University to lend this thesis to other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public. I further authorize OCAD University to reproduce this thesis by photocopying or by other means, in total or in part, at the request of other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research.

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*As ever, for Natalie, my whole heart —*

*You have made our world the softest place. I am, forever, grateful.*



TO EVERY MOMENT, OBJECT, SPACE, AND BODY THAT IS MAKING THIS  
WORLD A SOFTER PLACE –

*Thank you, I love you.*

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## Foreword

*“To posit possibilities beyond the norm or, indeed, a different future for the norm itself, is part of the work of fantasy... Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread. I think we should not underestimate what the thought of the possible does for those for whom the very issue of survival is most urgent” (Butler, 2004, p. 29).*

The specifics are not the critical point; the point is the feelings. At least for me it is. I don't usually remember specifics, but I remember feelings. In recounting certain experiences, as I do herein, I should not be assumed to be a reliable narrator when it comes to the details. This isn't a court of law. You can count on me for the feelings, though.

I get attached to words. The effect of what a word is doing. When I fixate on that part, the doing of the word, I experience a certain semantic satiation. The nothingness of it all is liberating in some way — the satiation is in my body, I feel the relief all over, my muscles unclench. In this project and in my life, I discuss softness a great deal. Soft is a feeling first and foremost. In retelling my experiences, I am concerned with the feeling, because that is the part I remember.

Within academia, there is often very little space for non-normative ways of being or doing. Through this work, I share and interpret my own lived experiences of being and doing non-normativity within academia, to establish and reclaim my own academic identity. The reality of my embodied experience is reflected in each of these pieces, in an effort to interrupt normative ways of being within academia. In these pages, I am often in conversation with myself. I write in multiple voices, often depicted through a change in *font* or *font*.

I interrupt myself (*thought. other thought. intrusive thought. connected thought*), I am often unsure of the right time to say something, I can never remember to raise my hand. Interrupting — breaking things up— creates a sense of domain and boundary which I require for information to be manageable to me.

I will not explain these interruptions to you. I do not believe that is the point. They are interruptions – snippets and stories of experiences that have interrupted me at one point or another. As they occurred, these interruptions were inconvenient, ill-timed, and threw off the “flow” of the moments they intruded on. I have intentionally worked to keep the interruption intact, because that is true to the feeling.

When I write, from a visual and sensory perspective, I cannot have the page become an endless stream of paragraphs. I require compartmentalisation, zones where words and thoughts are broken up. I need a rhythm that facilitates the way in which I process information. As such, there is a rhythm to this document, a pace that I work at and intonate in verse. Paragraphs may not read or be presented in the way they are conventionally expected to, but trust me, *I have thought a lot about this*, and the spacing and breakdowns herein are intentional.

Academia, like all institutions, aims to standardise, streamline, constrain. I have tried and failed to make myself fit into these constraints. So, this instead is an attempt at making academia fit me.

## Preface

When I was a kid, I always had a special desk, always sat in the V.I.P. area of almost every classroom. This V.I.P. seating assignment was, purportedly, to help “limit distractions”. While most desks in a class were grouped together, or arranged into rows, my one-person desk came equipped with walls, cubicle style. The V.I.P. area was always in a corner, or to the side, or even right next to the teacher’s desk — strategically placed so my back would face the other desks, and I would face a wall. As I aged out of special desks, I aged into spending a great deal of class time in the hallway; I became a distraction to limit. I would be asked to leave the room and would then sit outside for some undesignated amount of time. Until the teacher felt I was ready to enter the room, I guess? This undesignated amount of time was the most insufferable part of it all. At least at the desk, even with the walls, I could turn to see the classroom clock, I could know how much time had passed.

*The hallway made me miss the desk.*

*The absence of a clock, I missed ticking hands*

*(those old clocks placed above every doorway)*

*seconds ticking loud, keeping time like a metronome.*

*Even with my back turned, I could follow the beat.*

*Clock and I, keeping time, hand in hand—*

*ticking hands,*

*busy hands.*

*Too noisy not to be contained,*

*in special desks, hallways, or glass cases.*

*Always on display.*

In my mid-20s, I decided to go to university. It took a while to feel ready, after all the time spent in special desks, after all the dismissals to the hallway, after all the potential that remained unfulfilled — “*had only I better applied myself*” (a direct quote from many report cards). A few weeks into my first semester, something notable happened;

Multiple separate people at the university I attended, who had each only known me a very short while, encouraged me to speak with campus mental health and medical services about being formally tested for neurodivergence.<sup>1</sup> I guess they strongly suspected I met the diagnostic criteria, and that seeking out a diagnosis would help me receive some necessary academic support and help me understand myself.

Several waiting lists, appointments, paperwork, months, and referrals later — I was diagnosed. This began a new (this time more welcomed) system of special treatment at school. My permanent diagnosed disability granted me access to The Office of Accessibility Services, and to a set of accommodations—none involving special desks or hallway dismissals—for each class I was registered in (if I remembered to file the correct paperwork).

Now, nearly ten years on and (nearly) three degrees later, I would say I have developed somewhat of an expertise in accessibility services, you might even call me a connoisseur. Though I am not always glad to have acquired this taste. As Jodie Hare states in her discussion on the politics of neurodiversity, “just because diagnosis is often required to access support, that does not mean that the system will work” (Hare, 2024, p. 38). Sometimes it all still feels like the hallway dismissals and special desks of old (even if now I have the government-approved documentation for why this may be so).

I have encountered many places, spaces, that ask me—expect me— to harden myself. In the context of this project, hardness can be understood as that which is rigid, firm, stoic, immovable, consistent even; whereas, soft can be understood in contrast, diametrically opposed. Softness is fuzzy, comfortable, versatile, emotional, made-to-measure. How often is empowerment, or agency, or validity only granted to that which is hard, or to those for whom stoicism is a graspable disposition?

I did not always know it, or have the words to best describe it, but my whole life I have been trying to operationalize softness. To practice softness, ask for softness, create softness. The world has often felt hard to me. I could never really “get it.” Why certain rules must be followed or why I must behave a certain way. I have always

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<sup>1</sup> “Neurodivergence is a broadly inclusive term that means any significant divergence from dominant cultural norms or neurocognitive functioning” (Walker, 2021, p. 69).

tried to understand and follow the script, but it has felt like I'm an actor trying to play some kind of role (except the character development and backstory in the script was lacking and plot points were missing, or at least vague, and the director was expecting a lot of improvisation).

**I always liked actors, movies, the theatre.  
Always as a viewer, never a participant.  
To be honest, I was always a little too distracted in drama class.  
I would forget my lines.  
Don't get me started on improv.  
Just the thought causes a certain nauseous swelling.  
Though, I think I have been desperately trying to  
"yes, and..."  
successfully since my dawn of time  
Golden rule of improv; acknowledge what happened  
(yes)  
and move the plot forward by adding something of my own  
(and)  
Maybe that is what this is— an attempt at addition, at acknowledging what  
happened and moving the plot forward by adding something of my own.  
Perhaps, it is more a documentation of many attempts;  
record keeping, an archive. In hindsight, it feels most like desire lines.  
A path taken, trodden, worked for and wanted.  
Though definitely not a map, it is decidedly pointed in one direction—  
toward  
softness  
I am headed there. I have to be. What other option do I have?**

Operationalizing softness is to ask, perpetually, insistently; *how can we make the world a softer place?* I cannot answer this question in any kind of tidy or succinctly satisfactory way. But I can, I do, insist on continuing to ask it. I must. Because I am convinced softness—in its myriad meanings and definitional defiance – is required for survival.



Bodies are soft and this world can be a very hard place, there is an observable disconnect, a misfit condition, between the softness of our bodies and the hardness of the spaces and systems that make up the world around us. My pursuit of softness is my response to this hardness. Softness is possibility, not a solution, but a resistance. I want to accommodate this soft body, embrace it. Not work to transform my flesh to stone.

Herein, I recount some of the ways, the times, the feelings; the experiences of asking for, seeking out, demanding, finding, and still searching for softness. Shaping, creating, offering softness.

## Introduction

*"It's important to remember that life is not always linear, or that the lines we follow do not always lead us to the same place.... Hope is an investment that the lines we follow will get us somewhere" (Ahmed, 2008, p.18)*

As I began this journey into my thesis project (heck, as I began the application process to even be here) I knew I had a singular question in mind that my research would build from: *how can we make the world a softer place?* I knew this question was not entirely "academic" in nature, I knew it would face accusations of being too vague and too broad in scope, I also knew it would be my unifying principle. I knew it was *my* question, *the* question. The only guiding light that could sustain my interest long enough to motivate me through this journey.

This thesis is a formal exploration of possible responses to this central question. It is also an invitation to you, dear reader, to wonder how you, too, may ask the same question. *How can we make the world a softer place?*

The objects I designed, fabricated, and subsequently exhibited constitute a necessary component of this project. Oscillating between writing and making continuously allowed this work (and me) to resist the binaries of object/idea, thinking/making, or practice/theory.

This question articulates a political project as well as a personal one. The question presents an opportunity to pursue alternate visions of a liveable life (Butler, 2004), an invitation to not only imagine, but to live, *otherwise*.<sup>2</sup> My ambition in asking this question is not to reach a conclusive response that I could succinctly outline over the course of this thesis. Instead, my aim has been to live and to work in the burgeoning invitations this question presents. This manner of practice-based research posits a compelling alternative to the tradition of separating head and hand by refusing to

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<sup>2</sup> "To say that something is "political" in this sense means that it is implicated in relations of power and that those relations, their assumptions, and their effects are contested and contestable, open to dissent and debate" (Kafer, 2013, p.9)

separate knowledge from the body that created it. The experience of attending to the physicality of things has fundamentally transformed my experience of being known by, and knowing, the world. Craft historically has had the power to do this.

Responding to the question, ‘*What is Contemporary about Craft?*’ Julia Bryan-Wilson states, “craft is itself a methodology for accumulating, transmitting, and altering knowledge” (Bryan-Wilson, 2013, p. 8).

Craft is a practice, a repeated action, a verb. To be human is to make. Our earliest ancestors were craftspeople. As humans, we use tools to make material our thoughts and ideas; “the ability to use tools lets us leave a permanent trace of our actions and thoughts for others to see” (Dissanayake, 1995). Because craft follows from everyday human experience, perhaps even from our very nature, it is innately social and political — there is rigorous intellectual labour that has been, and can be, performed through craft.<sup>3</sup>

*I Have Thought A Lot About This* is both physical and theoretical. Words as objects, and objects as words. Through this practice I have learned and hope to demonstrate that the world can become softer. That fitting should, and must be, possible.

By engaging with, indeed steeping myself in, queer theory and critical disability studies and the works of countless critical companions, I have come to believe that softness opens space to imagine, live-in, and create possibility. As in, possible lives and ways of being in the world that are *outside* of the rigid misfitting demanded of people like me. Judith Butler portrays this possibility as necessity, “the thought of a possible life is only an indulgence for those who already know themselves to be possible. For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity” (2004, p.31). In other terms, it’s an insistence on a possible life, with softness as the compass.

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<sup>3</sup> “The tools we use, and the environments in which we move, are built to compensate for our bodily limitations or to refine our capacities: how hard we can strike a nail or slice through a vegetable. There’s a reason historians locate some key origins of human civilizations in the periods where deliberate tool use is evident. The stuff we use between our bodies and the natural or built world—these augmentations are how humans organize and get life done” (Hendren, 2020, p.167).

In these pages things may not be arranged or found where a typical academic reader may expect to find them. This is purposeful; asking *how we can make the world a softer place* should be a little disorienting.

To help keep this disorientation productive, I offer the following as a roadmap to the structure of this document. I begin with theory – sharing the critical companions who have shaped this work, simultaneously, demonstrating the development of my own thinking and theory throughout.

First, an exploration of the language of fitting and *Misfitting* developed by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2011). Then, to the unsettling process opened by queer and crip concepts (McRuer & Fritsch, 2016) which illustrate the restrictive nature of normative expectations within institutional life (*Inaccessibility of Accessibility*) and the grief and gift of being and doing non-normativity within the hyper-normative structures of academia.

Following Judith Butler's (2004), insistence that the thought of a possible life is as crucial as bread for those of us who have never been able to imagine it, I expand on the concept of *Softness* to further delineate what is asked for when we are asking *for the world to be a softer place*.

*Objects and Orientations* respond directly to questions of softness by exploring the transformative potential of craft and objects to queer both theory and space.<sup>4</sup> I then turn to the "results" of this investigation. The *Furniture Objects* designed and fabricated; the *Chest Cabinet*, *Armchair*, and *Buddy Desk* offer a material response to the central question— *how can we make the world a softer place?* I reflect on the *Exhibition* of these objects and the potential that was realized as the audience came into contact with the pieces. Ultimately, I present a *Manifesto for Making the World a Softer Place*; a possible roadmap for softness as a way forward.

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<sup>4</sup> I take this use of queer not merely as a label for sexuality but as a marker of atypicality, drawing on queer theory's commitment to depathologizing "non-normative ways of living" (Cvetkovich 2007, 461).

*I didn't just hear it. Did I even hear it?  
I feel the sound. I feel the sound, immediately.  
All up and down my body, all shaky in my bones.  
I feel the sound so much and so sudden that I am sure I feel nothing at all. That  
I will feel nothing at all, ever again.*

---

*I really like Popular Mechanics magazines. I recently found an online archive which  
compiled scans of the monthly issued magazine, beginning in 1905, all the way to  
2005. 100 years.*

*Approximately 1,200 issues.*

*I became obsessed with the antique science of it all. The texture of the pages, I  
could feel the drawings through the screen. I specifically searched for drawings,  
diagrams, and depictions of space-time from the 1910s to 1920s, around when  
Einstein's theory of relativity was being developed.*

*Did you know that there is no objective understanding of the 'moment of now' in  
mainstream physics?*

*The closest conception is a representation of the theory of relativity using light cone  
diagrams. Two cones (think of ice cream cones, as a visual reference) are stacked,  
end to end, pointed end touching pointed end. The bottom, or lower cone, represents  
everything past. The upper cone represents a possible future.*

*The moment of now is at the apex, the point in the middle, where the two-pointed  
ends of the cone meet. No objective understanding, just geometric diagrams  
venturing their best guess.*

*Just me, in the moment of now, trying to help you imagine two ice cream cones,  
stacked end to end.*

*If you were to get two ice cream cones at this present moment and somehow  
succeed in stacking them pointed end to pointed end, and then you were to reach  
towards these cones, and somehow touch that space where their two ends meet,  
then, you would meet me.*

---

*Here, you can meet me, too.*

*Now, as a baby (but I think even a baby has more control than this).*

*A balloon popped, right next to me.*

*Then, I'm a baby again.*

*I get so sick of everyone infantilizing me. Now I infantilize me.*

*A big balloon baby.*

*I try to smile at everyone in the room, who all seem to be looking over at me,  
either surprised or concerned?*

*Someone should have squeezed me up when they saw the look on my face (I  
feel the look as I write this).*

*Like an attentive mother trying to rock away the storm clouds mere moments  
before the torrential downpour begins.*

*Too late, it's already raining.*

*I didn't know anyone there very well. I couldn't recognize my attentive mother.*

*I thought the rain might be crimson, like a plague. Wrath of god for the feeling of the sound, blood from my ears.*

*Turns out the tears were a saline solution.*

*Except they solved for nothing other than embarrassment. Salt content too high to do any healing.*

*I was so angry, as my body reacted without my permission.*

*With the tears already present, and the room full of mostly strangers – birthday party attendees – and the concerned look on these strangers' faces becoming increasingly directed toward me, I put on a big boy mask.*

*Too late to do anything about the tears, but if I just worked hard enough at pretending that a thousand fire engines weren't racing through my chest, full sirens on, at that very moment—I could control the flailing.*

*Sometimes social pressure secures certain behaviours, if the stigma feels heavy enough.*

*I tried to press my brain into action by reminding it of the stigma that would surely follow if I tried to bulldoze my skull through the concrete wall at that moment. I wanted so badly to punch my whole skull through the concrete wall at that very moment.*

*I didn't.*

*You could read that as victory or defeat.*

*I couldn't see. Could only feel the sound.*

*I am a baby again, maybe toddler now. I steady my feet to stand, the fleet of fire engines still barrelling through my chest won't seem to shut up.*

*I can still smell a bit of latex lingering in the air.*

*These fire engines have really hijacked my nervous system against my will. The sound feels red.*

*I leave the room. Not sure how.*

*Sobbing in peace. Still aware. Vigilant, to keep the flailing confined to my hands. No flapping arms here.*

*She's a big girl now.*

*I don't think I will ever leave home without ear protection again.*

*The moment won't really leave me. The fire engines have built a home in the cavity of my chest. They remind me they live there now – only at the most inconvenient of times.*

*I saw an ambulance on the street the other day, I started to cry.*

## Misfitting

The world has often felt hard to me. Sharp edges. Poking and perturbing.  
Nothing really fits quite right.

These unspoken rules and expectations didn't fit quite right. The more awareness I gained, the more I became rather fixated on this hardness in the world; the systems and concepts, governments and "invisible" things. These structures set the rules (spoken and unspoken) and establish the acceptable ways of being in the world. I then began noticing these same forces and expectations present in the realms of furniture, design, and the built environment. This hardness I was noticing was all *outside* of me.<sup>5</sup> Of course, I experienced their impact, but I couldn't really discern that part just yet. I was mostly an observer— noticing the rough edges all around, and wrestling with how I could point them out, make others notice, and *do something* about it.

**It has always been this way. I think I've always been this way. Seeing things and understanding or feeling things outside of me before I can see or feel things inside myself. I won't feel I'm hungry until someone else remarks that they are or I take note of someone eating their lunch.**

My life and experiences have always seemed to follow a similar trajectory – outside first, inside second. As I learned about furniture and how to craft pieces of my own, I started noticing furniture in new ways, all around me.

As I learned about seating (conventions and typologies) I started thinking a lot about benches, taking note of seating in public spaces, particularly benches around the city. Different forms, placements, and placards explaining why and how said bench came to be there. Benches represent a place to sit, commune, relax, and repose. The bench is a hallmark of free, fair and accessible public space where one is free to

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<sup>5</sup> In my view, hardness is something we innately understand, a tacit kind of knowledge. The academic demand to define all terms can feel a bit stifling, especially here as my focus remains with softness. However, for the sake of best practice – hard functions as a catchall, a representation of the bad stuff, the hard stuff (literal and figurative) in the world.

do nothing, or consume nothing, in order to stay. How furniture in public space is designed and cared for determines our relationship with the city and the relationships formed within it. I started thinking about public spaces; wondering who the seating in these spaces was *really* for. It became increasingly clear that the designs of the spaces around us express a political theory; about who is deserving of access and who is not, who is part of the public, who the world is designed for and who is omitted.<sup>6</sup>

Design is a conduit, of ideals, priorities, and ultimately, of power. This is the hardness. We often perceive the world around us as immutable, inevitable, and eternal. At once, it is material, tangible, physical (i.e., sidewalks, benches, buildings, etc.) and simultaneously theoretical—tied up in policies, ideology, systems, culture, and concepts — the non-physical things that design our world. Design and ideology work together to make up and maintain the rough edges and the hard natures of our world. The design of the spaces, places, and furniture around us favour one way of being, of moving, and of fitting. As Sara Hendren remarks, the city is designed to keep us moving at an acceptable pace, at “an ideal of speed and efficiency [that] presumes a form of able-bodied productivity” (Hendren, 2020, p.149).

But what about those bodies that move through the world at a different, or slower, pace? We are each faced with the inevitability of changing needs and changing pace over a lifetime — pregnant bodies, aging bodies, those with children and strollers to manoeuvre about, recovering bodies after injuries, the list is infinite. Furniture designers and makers are concerned with bodies – we are trained to interrogate form, fit, and function. We ask: *Who is it for? What is it used for? How will it work, fit, and look?* As a burgeoning furniture maker, I recognized that the fundamental question at hand is really, *what kind of body will this accept?* This is the central question of furniture design and fabrication: how will a body meet the world? This

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<sup>6</sup> “Once built, our cities continue to shape and influence social relations, power, inequality... Stone, brick, glass, and concrete don’t have agency, do they? They aren’t consciously trying to uphold the patriarchy, are they? No, but their form helps shape the range of possibilities for individuals and groups. Their form helps keep some things seeming normal and right, and others “out of place” and wrong. In short, physical places like cities matter when we want to think about social change” (Kern, 2019, p.14).



inquiry inevitably becomes a discussion about access—who is the world designed for? Which bodies get to interact with the built environment in a way that fits, and who is left feeling like a misfit? And, beyond furniture, who gets to be included, and who is excluded—from design, academia, society? For whom are systems and physical places designed. Which bodies and ways of being are considered, and which are marginalized or designed out of existence?<sup>7</sup>

This thinking about access in its myriad forms and meanings, and looking through this lens into various domains, led me to encounter the language of misfitting, established by Rosemarie Gardland-Thompson (2011). I saw how this concept could be augmented to apply across disciplines and could provide a language through which to critique certain central practices of furniture design.

**After a while I started to see and feel this concept as it related to me.**

**Or, in fact, in me.**

I spent the final year of my furniture design undergraduate degree working on a thesis about these topics — about the hardness of the places and the spaces I observed around me, and wondering why the world is designed and organized in this way. I was trying to make furniture and write words that would help others see and feel misfit, the way I was seeing and feeling misfit. Somewhere along the journey of that year, I began to realize that *misfit was also seeing and feeling me*.

**The embodied experience of observing this exterior phenomenon  
and then feeling it in me, was much like recognising I hadn't eaten yet  
today as someone pulled out their lunch.**

**I had language for the misfit between myself and this place.**

Misfitting describes the incompatible relationships between disabled bodies and material surroundings. The concept revolves around the idea that certain bodies and identities are seen as deviant and therefore disrupt the prevailing notions of what is

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<sup>7</sup> Robert McRuer (2006) argues that queerness and disability are deeply connected in their resistance to normativity, through their mutual challenge to compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory-heterosexuality. "Compulsory able-bodiedness functions by covering over, with the appearance of choice, a system in which there is actually no choice" (McRuer, 2006, p. 8), a framework that parallels Adrienne Rich's (1980) notion of compulsory heterosexuality. Both queer and crip identities disrupt dominant expectations of the body, desire, and functionality, revealing the ways in which normativity is always precarious and upheld through exclusion.

considered “normal” or “acceptable” (Garland-Thomson, 2011). Garland-Thomson suggests that misfit bodies carry a social and political charge, as they challenge and expose the limitations of normative expectations. "Fitting and misfitting," she explains, "denote an encounter in which two things come together in either harmony or disjunction [...] The problem with a misfit, then, inheres not in either of the two things but rather in their juxtaposition, the awkward attempt to fit them together. When the spatial and temporal context shifts, so does the fit, and with it meaning and consequences" (Garland-Thomson, 2011, p. 592-3).

To fit is to be of the right shape or size for, or to be of a suitable quality, standard, or type to meet the required purpose. Fit is synonymous with alignment, match, integration, and coordination. Alternatively, a misfit is something, or someone, that fits badly or is poorly adapted to a situation or environment. Misfits are square pegs in round holes; associated with that which is abnormal, synonymous with misalignments, mismatches, gaps, and undesired properties.

I adopted the grammatical flexibility (Garland-Thomson, 2011, p. 593) of misfit as a lens through which to see and understand both the world and myself. Finding this vocabulary was much like learning a new language — I had to walk around with it, try and make use of it, stumble through the more difficult parts until I began to dream in the new language, began to communicate with ease.

Misfit provides a compelling framework through which to approach the “problem” of disability in design.<sup>8</sup> It pushes back against normative expectations that insist disability must be solved for or that accommodating means fitting. Typically, disability has been regarded as a problem to avoid or a list of design criteria, boxes to tick off. As Aimi Hamraie (2017, p. 44) notes, “Nineteenth- and twentieth-century designers treated impairment as a confounding element in industrial systems and prescribed technological solutions focused on normalization and assimilation”.

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<sup>8</sup> Of note, though linguistically misfit does, on occasion, function as a stand in for disability, it is not a euphemism. It is a relational framework, stretching and reshaping how we conceive of and can imagine relationships between body and world.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's conception of misfit works to dispel assimilation as the ultimate goal. Indeed, the goal is not to solve for the misfit. To attempt to "solve" for disability means codifying narrow conceptions of what a body is and can do, it means furthering harmful ideologies of normative ways of being. As Neil Marcus put it, "Disability is not a brave struggle or courage in the face of adversity. Disability is an art. It's an ingenious way to live" (as cited in Williams, 2021).

Embracing misfit means embracing disability, which in turn puts the onus of change on the misfitting circumstance or environment, not on the person. Assimilate the built environment to people, not the other way around! Because so many of us have been taught (implicitly and explicitly) throughout our entire lives that misfitting is to be either feared, rejected, or pitied, embracing such a way of being in the world remains a revolutionary act.

**I decided I am done bending myself to force a fit.**

**Done being a contortionist**

**(I think it is a profession most age out of anyways).**

Embracing misfitting means understanding disability as a creative force and method of making and unmaking the world.

"Crip" has come to be used as an out-and-proud descriptor and practice in disability activism and disability culture. According to Robert McRuer (2024), crip is "fabulously identitarian and fabulously anti-identitarian at the same moment" – resisting respectability while also serving as a tool for critique. Crip theory highlights how disability, even when rendered invisible in a given context, remains deeply embedded in the structures that shape our understanding of the world. It pushes us to recognize disability not as an afterthought but as central to reimagining and transforming dominant narratives, frameworks, and systems. "Crip" also functions as a critical framework, offering a way to examine bodies, minds, and behaviours that resist easy classification within existing understandings of impairment, disability, illness, and embodiment. Providing language for experiences and ways of being that do not neatly fit into available categories.

Aimi Hamraie has stated, "crip...is a specific commitment to shifting material arrangements" (2023, p.307). The term implies a larger collective, those who are

connected by experiences of existing outside of the norms of a given society, insisting instead on “the non-compliant, anti-assimilationist position that disability is a desirable part of the world” (Hamraie & Fritsch, 2019, p.2). This insistence has led to a growing field of scholarship (Crip Theory), which affirms disability as generative alternative to conventional academic models. The term ‘crip’ or ‘cripping’ can cause someone to wince: its appeal to disability theorists and activists is in its harshness (Kafer 2013). Whereas traditional academic models understand knowledge as distinct from the body that produces it, Crip Theory and community locates the body, particularly non-normative bodies, as sites of knowledge to be embraced and celebrated. Hamraie (2017) contends that crip being and knowing are inseparable from crip ways of making and acting, referring to this as, “crip knowing-making” (p.99).<sup>9</sup>

Making is political the experience of misfitting is full of political potential, and when we insist on creating ways for the world to bend to accommodate our bodies, we embody and awaken the hidden politics of ability and normativity.<sup>10</sup> McRuer calls this insistence on transforming material arrangements “the will to remake the world” (McRuer 2006, p.35). Hamraie asserts that “disabled people are experts and designers of everyday life” (Hamraie & Fritsch, 2019, p.2). Similarly, Cassandra Hartblay calls this disability expertise, which is “enacted knowledge specific to disabled people, acquired through life experience in non-normative bodyminds” (Hartblay, 2019, p.27).

I have always, already, been expertly designing my every day; navigating, negotiating, and facilitating. “The human body is a relationship, both to others and to the objects, spaces, structures, and systems that are always coming together or breaking apart” (Stein, 2021). I did not know it when I was first drawn to craft practices, or when I began my formal studies in furniture design, but I was ultimately

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<sup>9</sup> “Emerging from within disability cultures and communities, these experimental practices of knowing-making challenged hierarchies and power relations within the field of access-knowledge by shifting expertise to those with lived experiences of disability and away from the outside experts often designing in their name” (Hamraie, 2017, p.99).

<sup>10</sup> “Making is political in that it gathers networks of kinship and belonging around world-building practices that challenge mainstream cultural norms and values” (Mills & Sanchez, 2023, p. 442).

seeking to further that relationship – to ease the material misfits between my body and the world, to make misfits into fits. Misfitting is an encounter with the hardness of the world, *and* it is an opportunity to ask – *how can we make the world a softer place?*

*I'm always looking for words  
 I'm always trying to understand.  
 To make sense of.  
 Always wondering, analyzing -  
 Did I read the room right?  
 Did this facial expression mean this  
 or that?  
 Did the person I was talking to  
 understand what I said in the way I  
 said it, or in some other way  
 altogether?  
 Did I make enough eye contact? Did  
 I make too much eye contact?  
 Remember to blink.  
 The other person just blinked.  
 Probably you should too. Oh yeah,  
 my eyes do feel dry.  
 So, I read a lot. Watch a lot. Listen a  
 lot.  
 Consuming anything I can like it's a  
 how-to guide for dummies.  
 My favourite picture book as a child  
 (Laura-Charlotte) taught me how to  
 feel about my toys, the objects  
 around me. How to care for them  
 and be cared for by them.  
 My Girl, the film, showed me how I  
 should behave at a funeral.  
 I still think about bees every time I  
 see a hearse drive by.  
 The relationship between Donkey  
 and Shrek taught me how to be flirty  
 in that that friendly-kind-of-way with  
 friends, strangers, and enemies.  
 How to have that kind of banter that  
 makes one seem smart, aware,  
 present, at ease.  
 Often, I'm simply quoting the film  
 directly.*

*I make everyone laugh —  
 "I'm here all week, try the veal," I  
 state as I fain a bow.  
 Do they know the source?  
 I started listening to the CBC  
 religiously when I moved to this city  
 – not for the news, but to learn the  
 cadence, study the delivery, so I  
 could harmonize intellectually with  
 my urban peers.  
 The ones whose parents had gone  
 to university.  
 So I could deliver public radio kind  
 of jokes,  
 even if I didn't understand the  
 formula.  
 I don't listen to the CBC or the news  
 much at all now.  
 But how many of us actually return  
 to the textbooks we have stashed  
 away from our studying days?  
 They are there (too expensive to  
 part with) but only peripherally.  
 Background.  
 I'm trying to unlearn some of what I  
 memorized from the textbooks.  
 A lot, actually.  
 Some of the movies I studied, too.  
 Trying to be less scripted, trying my  
 hand at being more wrong than  
 right.  
 Trying to be comfortable with all of  
 the layers  
 More like an onion.  
 Onions have layers, we both have  
 layers.  
 You get it?  
 Not everyone likes onions.  
 I cannot care what everyone likes.  
 (Shrek, 2001).*

## The Inaccessibility of Accessibility (Services)

I have been joking for years how this is the title of my forthcoming memoir. It has always gotten a laugh or invoked nods of deep understanding, so I've kept the joke on the roster particularly in doctors' offices or accessibility services appointments. Especially when I am asked to provide or keep track of some kind of paperwork or multistep task that anyone should know for someone with my level of executive dysfunction is equivalent to asking a child not to eat the marshmallow or asking someone to hike Everest in a single afternoon.<sup>11</sup> Over time, though, the more I have said it, the more I have *felt* it, the more it has become less and less of a joke – but I have kept it around as a punchline because laughing is often better than the alternative. All the best jokes hit on some kind of truth, don't they? They observe and exploit a taken-for-granted facet of our lives. I guess the joke had been doing that before I even realised it. But as I have moved through the world and through institutions now as a formally diagnosed disabled person for about a decade, this joke has come to hit a little too close to home. As I near completion of my second degree in a studio-based university setting, the joke has continued to evolve; from lived experience to rationale and rallying cry, and now it is the driving force behind transforming this thesis into a memoir of sorts.

When I was first formally diagnosed and began to navigate these new systems and services that were in place to support me, I was at a liberal arts university studying political science and philosophy. And, at first, accommodations felt amazing in this context. Support of any kind in a school setting felt so exciting, accommodation felt so exciting, and I did benefit from writing exams in a separate room where I wasn't overwhelmed by all the sounds and movements of everyone and everything else. Here, I began to understand myself.

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<sup>11</sup> "Current institutional support systems ...rely on the student to apply for, access and implement all their own support... This approach fails to recognise the emotional labour and practical challenges of doing so ... [This assumes] that neurodivergent students possess a profound understanding of pedagogical systems that we have not yet experienced, as well as an awareness of the various support options that may be available to us. It presumes that we will have the capacity and resources to advocate for our needs to staff when this may conflict with our desire to be seen to fit in" (Chand et al., 2025).

I went on to study furniture design where there was little connection between accessibility services and the shop-based programs. The disconnect was so pervasive, and trying to negotiate accommodations in an atypical classroom environment felt nearly impossible.

**Because if the deadlines are flexible, then I missed critique, which is the core component of the program and the only way I can really grow, but also, like, conventional timelines don't work for me.**

So, there is a real friction, and by the time I was in my 4<sup>th</sup> year, I had written and presented my own Letter of Accommodation to faculty in my program and was acting as a liaison between fellow students and the services they were trying to access.<sup>12</sup>

I think what often happens, what has happened to me, is that by the time I come to understand my access needs in a particular context, figure out how and where to advocate for those needs, and find the time and capacity to do so, my time in that particular context is almost over. I have gotten better over time and with great assistance, so that I can reach that critical juncture of self-understanding and move on to the self-advocacy step a little sooner, but sometimes I wonder at what cost. And sometimes I wonder why. And mostly I get frustrated and deflated, because every time a context changes, I must begin the whole process all over again.

There can be this real disconnect between accessibility services and the people who use those services (at least, this has been a part of my experience).

Accommodations depend on how willing (or unwilling) a given professor or administrator is understanding of one's particular disability. While legally, if equipped with "proper" documentation one's right to accommodation cannot be denied, there remains a great deal of variability in how those accommodations are enacted.<sup>13</sup> This

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<sup>12</sup> "Self-advocacy is viewed as vital to disabled student's success. This ...promotes a skills-deficit model which locates the "deficit" within disabled students. This leads to a focus on skills-based training to account for the apparent "deficit" —and ignores the institutional context within which students are self-advocating because all the emphasis is placed on the individual. This approach to a perceived skills-deficit in disabled students reinforces an individualized model of problem identification and response" (Woolf & De Bie, 2022).

<sup>13</sup> "It is important to recognize that, just because diagnosis is often required to access support, that does not mean that the system will work" (Hare, 2024, p.38).



circumstantial component can cause a lot of whiplash – one professor may say, “no problem,” while the next may be much more rigid, unwilling, or even outright refuse<sup>14</sup>. This unwillingness can create a subsequent bureaucratic conundrum of trying to file a complaint to advocate for one’s legally protected rights<sup>15</sup>.

But the former, those who are flexible and understanding, become allies. This is a recognizable experience for many of us with disabilities who navigate institutions – we make allies and identify safe places and people who can understand and support us. Yet the system does not change, so when our found institutional allies leave or are replaced, we find ourselves out of luck again (and the cycle repeats). As a longtime academic and disabled person, I have my own pacing and ways of navigating institutions. I have been able to work in this way thanks to the allies I have found along the way. I have also been able to carve this path for myself thanks to my upbringing (especially my mom), who modelled and taught me the skills of self-advocacy that have been consistently required as I have moved through academia.

At almost every turn, there is a new demand for self-advocacy. I must be aware of and notice a wrong being done, a right being denied, an ableist assumption being made, and/or an inaccessible barrier being enacted.<sup>16</sup> After noticing, I must decide whether the barrier at hand is worth overcoming. I ask; is this really a problem? How much of a problem is it? Is this just a “me thing” or will others experience this too? If so, do I therefore have a responsibility to the people who will come after me to work for change?

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<sup>14</sup>See the documentary podcast series *Diagnosis Grad School* by Olivia Dreisinger for a critical exploration of challenges faced by disabled students, staff, and faculty within academic institutions (specifically in Canada)

<sup>15</sup> My experiences of this rigidity have at times felt nearly purposeful and strategic on an administrator’s/ professor’s behalf, knowing many disabled people, like myself, appear (and feel) almost biologically predisposed to bureaucratic ineptitude... but who is to say...

<sup>16</sup> The term “aversive ableism” was coined by Carli Friedman in 2018 to refer to documented patterns of discrimination (implicit, subtle, indirect) towards disabled people which are present in and amongst those who are progressive and well-intended. This discourse is highly applicable in academic institutions where the collective consensus is that we are all forward-thinking, educated, progressive individuals and therefore reject the notion that anti-disability discrimination could be present.

Then, I must consider the cost. How long will it take? How much backlash might I encounter? What steps will I need to go through and how onerous will they be? What will the cost be – to my health, wellbeing, and time (which is a precious yet precarious resource I already have great difficulty managing)? All of this before an “actual” action takes place.

“Access is complex. It is more than just having a ramp or getting disabled folks/crips into the meeting. Access is a constant process that doesn’t stop. It is hard and even when you have help, it can be impossible to figure out alone” (Creating Collective Access, 2011). Over time all these microaggressions can wear on a person. They have worn on me. Which perhaps offers a partial explanation for the reality that though the number of disabled students in postsecondary is growing rapidly, the graduation rate of disabled students is rising at a much lower rate (Woolf & De Bie, 2022). To resist this wearing effect, it becomes important to document and share some of the absurdities, and to laugh and joke about the silliness of it all. Institutions can feel rather individualizing, implicitly propagating a “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” message. Sharing and laughing works to make grief collective rather than these experiences being individual problems with individual solutions.

**It’s hard to get to the bottom of stuff sometimes, you know?  
All the bureaucracy and all of the stuff. They don’t make waders  
tough enough to hold up under these conditions. Not to get all  
swampy on us. Swamps get a bad rap (this is quoting Shrek again).**

I love academia, though I have not always loved school (as I’ve mentioned). I have built my life in, around, and through academic institutions. So, how can I critique something I am (and hope to remain) a part of?<sup>17</sup> How do you bless and curse something at the same time? How can critique be productive?

In the US, as much as two-thirds of college students with disabilities have not alerted their campus of their condition(s) (Dolmage, 2017). In *Academic Ableism: Disability*

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<sup>17</sup> “Critique is understood as an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living” (Butler, 2004, p.4).

*and Higher Education*, Jay T. Dolmage (2017) argues that higher education has historically been structured in opposition to disability.<sup>18</sup> College campuses were designed with the most capable, hyper-able students in mind. I have *felt that*.<sup>19</sup> Somewhere along the way of completing this thesis, at a point in time when I was struggling to “keep up” with the systems and structures of institutional life, someone soft said to me, “the university compartmentalises time, but we will not do that to you here. We will not put that on you.” A-typical programs require a-typical supports. Access is complex and ever-changing. Just because this accommodation works in this environment, does not mean it will be applicable in that one.

I have worked in wood shops assisting students for a number of years. When we are introducing students to the shop for the first time, we have them create a relatively simple project that introduces them to several different tools as well as safe working procedures in the space. Without getting into the weeds about it, in essence, we have students trace a shape onto a piece of wood and cut it out. This involves manipulating the piece of wood in various orientations, through various stages, while anticipating how both the machine and the wooden piece will respond to the machine at each step to achieve the desired outcome. Each time I lead a group or individual through this exercise, I am transported back to the assessment room where I am attempting to assemble a series of blocks according to a set of instructions. Someone is watching me do so, keeping track of my movements and the time simultaneously.

***Now, I am the someone watching. I am watching working memory not work. Left gets confused for right and right for left. Once, in the middle of this instructional exercise, I was trying to help a student distinguish left from right. “Other right,” I said as they pulled up their sleeves to reveal “L” and “R” tattooed on either wrist, respectively.***

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<sup>18</sup> “Disability is not a fixed state or attribute but exists in relation to assemblages of capacity and debility, modulated across historical time, geopolitical space, institutional mandates, and discursive regimes” (Paur, 2017, p. xiv).

<sup>19</sup> “Some bodies more than others will be at home in institutions” (Ahmed, 2012, p.3). I am both at home in and stranger all at once. You may sense that in my writing, the back and forth of home and away.

*I told this student about how my right thumb is double jointed. An internal reference point. Like my body knew since birth, I would need all the help I could get.*<sup>20</sup>

Disability reveals our fundamental vulnerability — that we need each other, are shaped by one-another, indeed, our very survival is contingent on one another. In their 2004 book, *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler holds that grief challenges the boundaries of our individual autonomy and disrupts illusions of self-sufficiency; “Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something” (2004, p.19). In this sense, grief need not remain a privatising inward experience but can instead turn us outward, exposing the relational constitution of the self in making us aware of our own vulnerability.

Grief holds productive potential: by rendering us undone, grief compels us to rethink the norms that govern our lives and opens to us possibilities for transformation. Grief can be mobilized as a force for expanding the categories of liveable and recognizable lives — it can lead us to ask what conditions make for a liveable life. Thus, grief becomes not only an affective experience but a political and ethical force that reconfigures both the self and the social world. This critical acceptance and prioritization of interdependency, radically challenges neoliberal ideals of self-sufficiency and autonomy by making visible the ways in which all bodies rely on others. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s (2011) concept of *misfitting* helps to frame this interdependency by emphasizing that disability is not an inherent lack but a mismatch between body and environment. When we experience loss—whether the loss of a loved one, the loss of normative bodily function, or the loss of assumed independence—there is an undoing that forces a recognition of relational vulnerability. Just as Butler insists that grief is not merely destructive but productive, disability, too, should not be understood exclusively as a site or experience of loss. Rather, it can reveal new ways of being, new dependencies that challenge the harmful pathologization of need.

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<sup>20</sup> “By surviving when society was built to prevent their survival, disabled people become sites of political power and knowledge in their very existence, working against normative conceptions of whose knowledge is valuable or worthy” (Nusbaum and Steinborn, 2019, p. 30).

**Grief as disability, disability as grief.**

**To understand grief as privatising is to misunderstand grief, to understand or insist on stability as privatising is to misunderstand what it is to be human. To be in this soft body.**

**To understand either exclusively through a lens of loss or lack is to miss something.**

**But, how do I balance the grief and the gift of being in this soft body?**

**And is to talk about disability at all in terms of grief or loss — I worry I could be contributing to endless negative stereotypes. But then I catch myself mid-thought. There is trauma, there is sadness, there is grief to disability, diagnosis, disclosure — to the fundamental fragile contingency of our embodiment.**

**I know in my body, in my bones kind-of-knowing, that supercrip narratives of toxic positivity are far more harmful (and far more present).<sup>21</sup>**

Sara Hendren (2020) furthers this critique by demonstrating how assistive technologies disrupt ableist assumptions about independence, making interdependence both visible and functional.

*“Open your kitchen catch-all junk drawer: paper clips, toothpicks, elastic bands, pushpins. These are the commonplace prosthetics and assistive technologies that are at home in the world with all our many bodies. Tools for holding the world intact when it threatens to fall apart in a mess—tools for reaching, bracing, connecting, the low-tech and the high-tech kind, together” (p. 29).*

So, if we stay with Judith Butler’s (2004) notion that grief forces us outside of ourselves, demanding recognition of our fundamental entanglement with others, while recalling how misfitting (Garland-Thomson, 2011) exposes the ways environments disable certain bodies, and, alongside Hendren, hold that assistive technologies reframe dependency as an expected part of life, then grief rather than reinforcing tragedy, might serve as an opening to new ways of being in the world. Through this lens, grief does not signify the loss of an idealized able body, but

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<sup>21</sup> Eli Clare in *Exile and Pride* (2015) coins the term supercrip to describe the dominant image of disabled people as “overcoming” our disabilities. These images “reinforce the superiority of the nondisabled body and mind. They turn individual disabled people, who are simply leading their lives, into symbols of inspiration” (Clare, p.33).

instead reveals the social, material, and technological networks that sustain us, ultimately expanding our understanding of liveability.

Misfitting creates a form of loss—not necessarily a loss of bodily integrity, as the medical model might assume, but a loss of assumed ease, access, or belonging in a world built for normative bodies.<sup>22</sup> There is grief in the recognition that one’s body does not seamlessly conform to dominant structures.

*Sometimes, often times, grief wants to harden us.*

*All the feeling feels too much.*

**We want to close-up, shut-off, stop the grieving feeling.  
Sometimes I want to make a brick wall of myself. So hard and reinforced none  
of the grief can even get to me.**

***But, good grief, great grief, gracious grief.***

**Reminding me how boring being brick would be.  
I don’t want to harden myself, I won’t grow a thick skin  
I want to stay soft, my skin remains thin  
I just want all the brick walls outside of this soft skin to soften too.**

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<sup>22</sup> “When we fit harmoniously and properly into the world, we forget the truth of contingency because the world sustains us. When we experience misfitting and recognize that disjuncture for its political potential, we expose the relational component and the fragility of fitting” (Garland-Thomson, 2011, p.597).

## Softness

I am someone who cares a great deal about words. Not only to say that I choose mine deliberately (though not always wisely), but I really do mean that I care about each word. I feel each one as it leaves my lips, my tongue giving shape to every vowel. My tongue muscles strong, maternal, as I form the consonants and mould the vowels, and gently but firmly, guide them toward the exit.

I choose words, yet I feel in equal measure chosen by words. Sometimes a single one, sometimes a series bound together into phrases – they find me, choose me, take up residence in my brain. At times I delight in this process, like a homecoming I welcome words and phrases with open arms. Other times, I do not consent – the proverbial neighbourhood is too full, or these new arrivals, I know, will surely make for bad neighbours. Despite my objections, they take up residence all the same. They burrow in, more like pests than humans, and I can't help but spit them back out: again, and again and again. In the wrong place, at the wrong time, sometimes to the confusion of those around me.

Often, even against my better judgement, my body-mind chases after the satisfaction of semantic satiation. The sweet, soothing confusion of meaninglessness. Sometimes, it is a way to leave one of these pesty neighbours behind, to evacuate him from the neighbourhood. Often, it is an intentional undertaking – some kind of meditative attempt at oneness so I can no longer locate the boundary between the wor(l)d and me.

Soft is a word that came to me a long time ago and has since refused to leave. Mostly, I am so grateful, so glad this is the case. Other times, I wish so badly soft would leave me. I want to harden, be so tough nothing can smooch me. Soft is a material quality, something I want to feel with my fingertips, to sit on and sink into, to be enveloped by. When I feel the prickly bit of a clothing tag left in the hem of my shirt and it begins threatening to send me into an overstimulated fit of rage, I want softness. Something comfortable against my skin.

Soft is a condition, a climate. Something dispositional. Soft is also something so much greater... akin to an atmosphere. At least, I would like for it to be. In fact, I need it to be. I demand softness – that is to say; I need rounded edges, gentle slopes, gradual gradations, fluid time.

Soft is the word, the concept, the framework, the methodology, the practice that brings together, and makes visible, the (seemingly disparate) concepts I am thinking with. Soft is a queer, disabled, feminist politic; an ethics, a practice, a way of being and becoming in the world. It is a choice to stay smooshy, when we have been taught that to succeed, we must be tough and gritty.

Soft is sharing what you have or asking the person who serves you coffee every day for their name. It is protesting, objecting, resisting – big and small. It's every time I demand to be accommodated, and every time I do so again – and again, and again – knowing that it can be so, insisting that it will be so. That the world, the space, the lighting, or the expectations can bend to fit me, instead of it always being the other way around.

Soft is an embodied knowledge – we know it and trust it in our bodies. Soft is a compassionate, empathetic approach to being in the world. It is an orientation toward oneself and others that understands our feelings, needs, and desires, not as a weakness, but as radical potential – the source of resilience and resistance. It is queer, challenging the rigid expectations of the cis-hetero-ablebodied-patriarchy. Soft is anti-capitalist in its embrace of care, interdependence, and collective wellbeing. Soft upends practices of neoliberal bootstrapping ideologies and myths of self-sufficiency. Soft rejects ableist insurances on productivity, hustle, and independence being tied to, or signifying, our worth.<sup>23</sup>

As such, soft is a misfit condition as well as a home for misfits. Soft is disabled; to be soft is disabling and to be disabled is to be soft. I am (most) interested in what

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<sup>23</sup> For more on thinking with this kind of softness, see [Radical Softness as a Boundless Form of Resistance](#) from GenderFail, 2021.



softness can (and does) do. I know what it has done, for me—it has become the organizing principle of my life. This involves noticing and paying attention. Other times, it is asking how it can be operationalised. How can softness be a form or site of resistance? How can soft places shape our experiences of the world, our embodiment, and our identities? And how might softness be a queer orientation?<sup>24</sup> This thinking resonates with Simi Linton’s work, who writes “It is not surprising that disabled people also speak of ‘coming out’ in the same way that members of the lesbian and gay community do” (1998, p.21).

In 2014, during a conversation at The New College, bell hooks offered the following description for the queer experience; “Queer not as being about who you’re having sex with (that can be a dimension of it); but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live” (hooks, 2014). I think we could easily swap the word *disabled* for *queer*, and meaning of the quote would remain unchanged; “*Disabled, not as being about ablebodied-or-ableminded-ness (though that can be a dimension of it); but disabled as being a self that is at odds...*”

My disability resides beyond diagnosis, just as my queerness resides beyond coming out, echoing M. Remi Yergeau’s words in *Authoring Autism*. As they write, “Disclosure bears its own kind of residual effects. My neuroqueer disclosures inflect and infect— they suggest an interpretive lens through which others feel an impulse to story my life, to story my being” (Yergeau, 2018).

**How much do I, or do I not, want to share about myself and specifically about my disability has been an ongoing topic of conversation between my therapist and I for months. By ongoing topic of conversation, I mean I can’t stop bringing it up. Wondering how much I do, or do not, want to disclose.**

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<sup>24</sup> Queer not as in an individual identity marker that is stable or coherent, but queer as indicating political affiliations of oppositional defiance to societal demands for normatively, legibility, and acceptability. Liberation over assimilation.

**Coming out in the southern belle, debutante, sense. As well as in the free-from-the-closet one.**

Coming out as soft has been similar to my experience of coming out as queer and (separately) as neurodivergent. Especially in how it felt, and feels, to myself and in my body and ways of being in the world.<sup>25</sup> When I recognized my queerness, when I understood my neurodivergence, both—primarily in a subconscious way—became this new lens through which I saw the world and inhabited it. On both occasions, somewhat suddenly, with this new understanding and embrace of myself, I saw queerness all around me—in small glances, in art, the way someone spoke, or dressed, or carried themselves. So too with softness. Coming out as soft meant that I could now see softness everywhere. Clacking ear protection like carabiners. Noticing hood and hats, worn like protective shields against bright lights & glares. Just as I first noticed signifiers like haircuts, outfits, and subtle little stares.

When I began embracing and sharing my queerness, I wanted to increasingly queer every part of my life. When I recognized my neurodivergence and began to understand myself, I wanted to (and began to) make all aspects of my life more accessible to me—crafting places and systems and practices and relationships and environments where I fit. So too with softness.

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<sup>25</sup> “What a neurodivergent person diverges from are the prevailing culturally constructed standards and culturally mandated performance of neuronormativity. Neurodivergence is divergence not from some “objective” state of normality (which doesn’t exist), but rather from whatever constructed image and performance of normality the prevailing culture currently seeks to impose” (Walker, 2021).

*My whole life I have been called a “bag lady”.*

*I think it was a kind of trope in 90’s movies – an older, bit disheveled looking person, who would feed pigeons in the park and cart around house and home.*

*“Everything but the kitchen sink,” my Nan would say. I just wanted all my things with me. Anything I loved or thought I might need, just in case. I was always worried about an object’s feelings.*

*I didn’t want to leave anyone behind.*

*So, I would have to pack extra. Emotional baggage, you could say.*

*Looking back at the “bag lady” accusations, I see myself with tenderness. I also know I was carrying around a certain wisdom;*

*I’ve always been trying to make the world fit me. Trying to mitigate, to soften the world’s hard edges by bringing anything I might need with me (and probably a few extras, to be sure).*

*Now, decades on, my wife pokes fun at me for the same thing.*

*We laugh at the odd artifacts I can justify carrying around, and the “bag lady” accusations carry on.*

*She, in her wisdom, has stopped me on more than one occasion from buying a trail pack or weekender bag (think stereotypical backpacking in Europe style) as my back-to-school backpack. In her tenderness, she embraces me; lets me keep endless half-full tote bags hung from every hook and even doorknob in our home. She never tries to empty them or combine their contents.*

*This is softness. So much love.*

*I’ve always been jealous of Mary Poppins — that wonderful bag that contained so much yet remained so small.*

*I bet my wife would let me buy a bag like that, but I have yet to find one (believe me, I have tried).*

*Mary Poppins was always quirky in the charming way, a cutesy one. Not quirky in the off-putting sense.*

*(I’ve often felt jealous of this aspect too).*

## Objects & Orientations

**Furniture as more- than (more than aesthetics, utility, placeholder, or...).**

**When I think of disability, of disabled people, so many of us have furniture that is critical for our survival;**

**Furniture that acts as an extension of our bodies, becoming body parts <sup>26</sup>**

**Furniture as vehicle**

**As extension**

**Furniture as orientation**

**Furniture as experience**

**Furniture as companion**

**Furniture as democratic**

**(Or, as dictator depending on circumstance)**

**Furniture often dictates preconceived ideologies around “appropriate” ways of being and behaving in the world.**

**Like the desks of my childhood.**

Objects help us find our way, and what we turn to matters (this is the central premise of Sara Ahmed’s (2008) book *Queer Phenomenology*). This wayfinding element is why I make things (why we all make things, to some extent), and why I keep making things when I get most lost— as a work of orientation, of finding my way, and of asking *what* I want to be oriented towards. Making is a navigational practice as well as an act of homemaking; “the question of orientation becomes, then, a question not only about how we “find our way” but *how we come to “feel at home”* (Ahmed, 2008, p. 7). Acts of making and shaping are acts of homemaking – which becomes a homecoming, a noticing and documenting — a record keeping or archive of something, somewhere, sometime.

**Words as objects, objects as words.**

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<sup>26</sup> “Such prostheses ease the material divergences between bodies and their locations, making misfits into fits” (Garland-Thomson, 2011, p.601).

Making objects is how I embrace the misfit. How I insist the world conform to me, rather than I always being the one who is conforming and contorting. This is the ever-present possibility of softness. In *Why We Make Things and Why it Matters*, Peter Korn asserts that this is “precisely what makes creative practice such a generous source of fulfilment, beyond the pleasure of engaging heart, head, and hand in unison. It exercises one’s innate capacity to re-form the given world in ways that matter” (2013).

There is always a story behind stuff, isn’t there? The hoarder or the strictest Marie Kondo’d among us could each tell of the why for what they have, respectively, chosen to keep in their homes. Objects feel like the perfect conduit for storytelling.

*They are stories themselves, they hold stories, keep record.*

If this world needed to be made mutable and soft at the edges, and if I needed to do the work of insisting it be so, I would want companions along the way. Throughout this experience, I created a series of functional objects that embody and reflect this process back at me. These queer companions – which I will soon describe in greater detail – are a work of translation, taking the feelings and impressions of navigating graduate school and translating them into form. I was guided by Sara Ahmed’s assertion, “to be oriented is to be turned towards certain objects, those that help us find our way” (Ahmed, 2008,p.1). These objects helped me find my way. Making them helped me get there and stay soft all-the-while. They are both fitting and misfitting at once.

Peter Fleming, who was the head of the Furniture Design program at Sheridan College, and who remains a motivating force behind all that I do, writes:

“Furniture is at once as intimate as clothing and as public as a building. It codifies our relationships, it serves our needs, and it reflects our humanity in its nomenclature; arm, leg, back. It stands mute while whispering its thoughts to us... It is the double of the body, since it describes in its positive the negative of our forms, holding the traces of our activities and our memories. It orchestrates our relationships: between friends, collaborators, clients, and adversaries, and if we let it, it deepens our understanding of each other...”(2005).

Sara Ahmed suggests that furniture “is an orientation device, a way of directing life by deciding what we do with what and where.” However, she also contends that “what makes furniture ‘furniture’ is this tendency to disappear from view” (Ahmed, 2008, p.168). This is what draws me to furniture; it shapes our lives, serves as a backdrop to our most formative and most notable moments. I wonder – would my childhood experience of the classroom be the same, would it be marked by so much shame, without the “special” desk? What if the desk didn’t exist, or its form was altered, or if I had attended school in a different era, one where dunce caps and stools were used instead?

“Form follows function” (Sullivan, 1896) is a golden rule of modern furniture design and architecture.<sup>27</sup> The phrase is an inescapable adage for anyone who has read anything about the Bauhaus movement. When I think of the desk’s form, I am reminded of its function, and I still feel a little sad. A lot sad, sometimes.

Furniture often recedes into the background. Yet, Ahmed (2008) suggests that bringing what is relegated to the background into the foreground can have a rather queer effect. Reflecting on my education this way, I see how the classroom queered me. I am not necessarily referring to nature vs. nurture here (or maybe I am?) but rather the way queerness can signify otherness.<sup>28</sup> The classroom's dynamics and structures worked to position me outside the norm.

When I was in grade 7 and 8, I had one teacher who enjoyed taking away my chair if I was caught leaning back on it (tilting the chair with my body weight so that the chair rested on the back two legs). He would take the chair, often yanking it backwards while I rushed to my feet before I fell to the floor. He would carry it to the front of the classroom and sit the now empty chair next to his desk. I would then be left standing for the duration of the class. Trying to complete my work, to write on the paper sat atop my desk, while standing was always particularly difficult. Seeing the chair

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<sup>27</sup> “All things in nature have a shape, that is to say a form, an outward resemblance, that tells us what they are; unfailingly, in nature these shapes express the inner life, the native quality” (Sullivan, 1896).

<sup>28</sup> Butler argues for queer as a “site of collective contestation” to be “always and only redeployed, twisted, queered” (1993, p.223).

positioned tauntingly at the front of the classroom and trying to avoid the endless stares of my peers was all a little humiliating.<sup>29</sup>

But that chair – its presence and sudden absence, being brought suddenly into view, and making everyone all at once aware of the deviation in the way that I sat – and I were queer there. We became noticeable for disrupting the classroom's normativity. As Robert McRuer (2006) proclaims, normativity is always upheld through exclusion. Our presence epitomised this.

I am grateful, in some ways, that I was never any good at upholding normativity. Yet, it still stings that I was used as a precarious pawn, excluded, to reinforce the norm. Sometimes the stories are a little sad. Often during this writing process I have been surprised by the memories and moments that have resurfaced, many of which I had forgotten decades ago.<sup>30</sup> I have enjoyed revisiting them, or, having them revisit me. I have hated having them revisit me. Both, and. The part I enjoy is no longer feeling the shame, **I can also sometimes taste blood as I write the words. I remain, forever, pissed off.**

This is the grief and the gift. And I suppose, for me, furniture has always been tied up in that mix. It makes sense to me that I am here now. This project was born from these “aha” moments and resurfaced memories that have slowly visited me across many years. It began taking shape when I built my first pieces of furniture, when I first experienced the embodied satisfaction of learning that I could be active in crafting the built environment around me. I could make the world fit me and not just try and force myself to fit the world. The tangible empowerment of craft culture, technique, and process changed my whole life.

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<sup>29</sup> It is estimated that by the age of 12, a child with ADHD may receive 20,000 more negative messages than her neurotypical peers (Jellinek, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> “Allowing myself to remember was a political reorientation: it led me to think and write about the politics of stranger making; how some and not others become strangers; how emotions of fear and hatred stick to certain bodies; how some bodies become understood as the rightful occupants of certain spaces” (Ahmed, 2012, p.2).

This experience of bespoke, handcrafted, fitting in a world is what led to my ongoing obsession with the concept of softness.<sup>31,32</sup> Fitting is soft, while misfitting is rough around the edges, pokey and hard. However, softness isn't about opposing misfit; it's about embracing it, intentionally allowing for misfitting. It's about insisting that the world become soft, rather than trying to harden myself to fit into it.

As with the words crip and queer, labelling oneself a misfit is distinctly different from being labelled as such. Being labelled soft in a world that can feel hell bent on hardness can be particularly fraught. But the strategy of beating our bullies to the punchline has a long lineage I attach myself to.

**“Queer theory troubles the norms that inform heteronormativity”  
I must have read this somewhere, I can't remember where.**

**But I read about this after I felt the trouble of it.**

**Existing as I am, in my body as it is (and was, and will be) has always seemed to trouble one norm or another. I think that is part of why I enjoy theory so much – it gives words to the troubles and to the joys of being troublesome.**

**Kindreds. Critical companions.**

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<sup>31</sup> I have been told my use of the word obsessive can read as pathological. It is. I obsess, fixate, cannot let go of. I hyperfixate, down rabbit holes (upon rabbit holes) for hours, days, on end. I can forget to eat, to sleep, to use the bathroom. These are the often underdiscussed parts, the not cute parts, of being in this soft body. When I say I obsess, I mean I obsess. I use the word intentionally, outing myself through particular vocabularies, before you get the chance to.

<sup>32</sup> “Letting them see our hyperfixations, meltdowns, obsessions, and outbursts could mean losing respect. But locking ourselves away means we conceal the reality of how inaccessible the world is for us. If we never allow our struggles to be seen or our needs heard, is there a reason to adapt to include us” (Price, 2022).



## Furniture Objects

*“I’m interested in objects, but I’m more interested in the atmosphere they create. For me, an object is like a tea bag. When you put it in a room, it’s like putting a tea bag in a glass of hot water. It generates something in the atmosphere” (Bouroullec, 2024).*

I don’t see pictures in my head, consequently my design process is a little different. It wasn’t until I was nearing the end of my furniture degree that I fully realized this about myself.<sup>33</sup> Because I can’t imagine things in my mind or manipulate shapes or objects either, the conventional ideate, sketch, iterate, prototype, and fabricate doesn’t work for me.

It took a long time for me to learn how to draw three dimensionally. As in, I was almost 30 years old when I finally learned how to draw a cube. It was, quite honestly, as almost insurmountable problem for me for the first 28 years of my life. I still don’t draw cubes intuitively. It is more so that I have memorized how to draw a cube, as one can memorize a sequence for completing a Rubix cube.

In light of this, my design and ideation process for making objects looks a little different than how I was trained. Drawing 100 ideation sketches that are variations of a core idea doesn’t really work when 3D sketching can make you feel crawling out of your skin. Instead, I use words. Words are ideas, sketches, and concepts, are variations of the theme. Words are how I identify the “problem” and the ideation process through which I work to solve it.<sup>34</sup>

I share this because it best provides a window into a particular experience that illustrates a whole – my experience of designing with words. And how words are not

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<sup>33</sup> This is called aphantasia, where a person is unable to form mental images (real or imaginary). There is no “mind’s eye” — no visual imagery of an object— rather one imagines concepts that would describe the object.

<sup>34</sup> I write in the way I think. If I jump from thought to thought, if the connecting words are missing, I hope you put yourself in my shoes, in my mind really. I read a while ago that the brains of neurodivergent people produce 42% more information at rest compared to neurotypical brains (Velázquez and Galan, 2013)

an end in and of themselves. They are a means, a process, an accessibility measure that *fits*. They are how I make the design process fit me.

### **Words as objects, objects as words.**

The concept of 'research-creation' describes this process, or something akin to it, as an integration of artistic practice and academic inquiry, ultimately transcending disciplinary confines. According to Natalie Loveless (2019), “research-creation...is a practice of love. It is an erotic, driven, invested practice. And, as such, it fails to fit into those models that see interdisciplinarity as a way to streamline and multiply research productivities. It is too disruptive for that” (p. 70).

My practice has never been described as streamline, and certainly not as productive in a typical sense. I move at my own pace. I find the category of research-creation a welcome addition to academia that works to reverse some of the institutionally engrained binaries of body/mind, thinking/making central to western academic discourse. While my work falls under the purview of this newly established category, I prefer to align myself more with a vocabulary, with vernacular traditions, than with categories. I look to Nicola L., Radical Design, and to Autistic<sup>35</sup> people— as movements and makers who embodied queer making and thinking (if we are to understand queer as a verb, and not a noun—as an activity, a becoming, a purposeful way of being in the world).<sup>36</sup>

All of the books, articles, references, citations, precedents I spent so much time with—reading and looking at and being alongside— started to feel a lot more like friends than words or photos on a page. So, I started referring to them all as my critical companions. As I would find a new author, or journal article, or furniture piece that I could feel was soft (aligned with my thinking) in some way, I began adding them to the list.

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<sup>35</sup> Devon Price aptly explains why I chose to capitalize Autism: “I choose to capitalize Autism and Autistic for the same reasons [that members of the Deaf community capitalize Deaf](#); it's an identifier I am proud of, a mark of community membership rather than a condition I have been saddled with” (Price, 2020).

<sup>36</sup> Sedgwick defines queer as: “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically” (1993, p.8).

I began to enjoy the double entendre of critical; these references became my companions in critique as well as indispensable components of this journey. As friends — they cheered me on, provided guiding light, were there when I needed a helping hand or shoulder to cry on. They are an ever-present reminder that I have so much softness in my corner, so much companionship at my side. A lot like this feeling I get when I am in a queer space and see older people — a reminder that we have always been here, so many have done this work before me so many have fought for me to be here today.<sup>37</sup>

I make furniture to be understood and to understand. “If we let it [furniture] deepens our understanding of each other” (Fleming, 2005, p.4).

I have witnessed this firsthand — craft practice and culture are fundamentally communal. It is a collective undertaking, an always learning.<sup>38</sup> Furniture, in its very essence is relational because to truly fulfil its potential, it must be used. When furniture is used, it becomes more than — more than object, more than inanimate, an extension of the body.

Embodied knowledge is central to craft; it is a living practice held in and through the body. My training as a craftsperson means that questions of function and outcome, use and usefulness, are ever present. This functional component central to furniture making is what drew me to, and maintains my interest in, the discipline. In and through its everyday-ness, furniture objects allow questions and considerations to linger *because* of its very usefulness. The intellectual labour performed through craft becomes evident as material, method and body interact.

The pieces in this exhibition are asking, nearly begging, for interaction — to be opened, closed, sat on, touched. This is the relational component of furniture

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<sup>37</sup> “You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was Dostoevsky and Dickens who taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who had ever been alive. Only if we face these open wounds in ourselves can we understand them in other people. An artist is a sort of emotional or spiritual historian” (James Baldwin Interview by Howard, 1963)

<sup>38</sup> “I think it's so foolish for people to want to be happy. Happy is so momentary— you're happy for an instant and then you start thinking again. Interest is the most important thing in life; happiness is temporary, but interest is continuous” Georgia O'Keeffe (as cited in Maguire, 2020).

broadly, and of *this furniture*, specifically. The forms beg the question (e.g., Why does this cabinet have arms? If form follows function, what is the function?).

The furniture orients the user toward the questions; it structures the space and the relations that happen there within.

It is important here to discuss what objects I made while I considered how the world might become a softer place (and wondered if it could at all). It is important to share with you how and why I made certain decisions in the fabrication of these objects, because for me, thinking and making are inseparable parallel processes that are always converging. When I state *I Have Thought A Lot About This*, I am not only referencing the type of (disembodied) theoretical thinking prioritized in traditional academic work. I am saying I have thought in and through the material, using craft to consider theory and theory to shape my craft practices, such that craft and theory mutually transform one another.

In the sections to come, I will explain each individual object in detail, the thinking behind them and the process of how it was made. Before we get there, there are two important considerations I must make you aware of. 1. Every object is blue. 2. Each piece has hands.

1. A friend once shared a story about her grandmother; I have not stopped thinking about it since. I will share the story here in her own words<sup>39</sup> –

*My grandmother, Henriette, was raised in Tecumseth, Ontario ... She is French- Canadian, wears lots of silver jewellery and has great legs.*

*Year-round, she wears a brimmed black hat squished onto a silvery, blunt-cut bob. There is always a pin attached to one side and the pin she wears most often is bright red. [On a phone call I had with her recently] she said she likes red because it is a primary colour. She likes red because it is vibrant and clear.*

*My grandpa had bright white hair that started low on his forehead and wrapped around his chin into a full, creamy white beard. After he died, for a period of time, the red pin on my grandmother's hat was exchanged for a blue heart. When I asked her about it at the time, she said,*

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<sup>39</sup> Reproduced with permission from the author.

*“Well, my lover has died and my heart is blue.”*  
(Gwynne Allanford, 2021)

*My heart is blue.* Stuck in my head like a refrain, I felt this then and still feel it now. There is a certain grief to the colour, isn't there?<sup>40</sup> I find it compelling how a colour can evoke and represent a feeling, I think the colour allows the feeling to take on new meanings. Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* (2009) tells whole stories of love and loss and life through the colour blue. On the first page she writes “I feel in love with a color –in this case, the color blue – as if falling under a spell, a spell I fought to stay under and get out from under, in turns” (Nelson, 2009, p.1). Blue is a spell I have been under since Gwynne shared about her grandmother several years ago.

Since, I have collected blue objects, painted my kitchen cabinets blue. Blue became the primary shade of the clothing I own, drawn to different shades for different days. As with a spell, at first, I did not realize I was under it. Nelson discusses the troubles that come from loving blue, “Is to be in love with blue to be in love with a disturbance? Or is the love itself the disturbance? And what kind of madness is it anyway, to be in love with something constitutionally incapable of loving you back” (Nelson, 2009, p.15)?

I knew the objects I was crafting needed to be blue before they began taking shape. I cannot adequately explain why I knew this beyond *the feeling*.

Blue is a feeling. While the objects embody a certain playfulness, something childlike, through their forms, there is something grief-y in the presence of blue. The blue I chose is vibrant (colour-FULL, fun), but it is still blue. Blue for the feeling of the grief and the gift of being in this soft body, the two are always inseparable.

“Can blue solve the problem, or can it at least keep me company within it? – No, not exactly. It cannot love me that way; it has no arms. But sometimes I do feel its presence to be a sort of wink – *here you are again*, it says, *and so am I*” (Nelson, 2009, p. 28). Under its spell, I worked to make blue love me that way; I gave blue arms.

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<sup>40</sup> We do say, *I'm feeling blue*, as an expression when we are feeling down and “songwriters have personified blue as the one friend they can count on” (Nelson, 2009, p. 42) when everything else is sad and lonely.

2. In my work I have often gravitated toward didactic or literal symbols as a way to distil, refine, and represent the myriad disparate thoughts that emerge over the course of a project. Reducing complex ideas to a single visual can be both satisfying and challenging, and it often proves to be a useful communication tool.

Hands and touch are not the same, yet for me, a hand serves as a symbolic and visual representation of touch in all its forms. When I reach out to touch, I am provoked by the act of touching and by the hands that touch back. Touch becomes consideration— considering bodies, space, and the reciprocal relationship between making and being made. It's an experience that is always felt, always unfolding. Reaching out, waiting, letting that liminal space between the end of my fingertips and the beginning of the world, linger.<sup>41</sup>

I have made hundreds of hands over the last handful of years — in wood, cardboard, fabric, foam. While at times the undertaking became obsessive, it was also really fun. Trying to find a perfect hand, to craft (with my hands) the perfect symbolic gesture. I am Goldilocks, searching for a hand that is not too big, not too small — a hand that fits *just right*.<sup>42</sup> I make hands in search of the softness that is fitting. I try over and over again, driven by a desire to make my contemplations and desires tangible, to create hands that can hold and be held.

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<sup>41</sup> "All stories are also the stories of hands — picking up, balancing, pointing, joining, kneading, threading, caressing, abandoned in sleep, cutting, eating, wiping, playing music, scratching, grasping, peeling, clenching, pulling a trigger, folding" (Berger, 2009).

<sup>42</sup> "I believe in low theory in popular places, in the small, the inconsequential, the antimonumental, the micro, the irrelevant; I believe in making a difference by thinking little thoughts and sharing them widely. I seek to provoke, annoy, bother, irritate, and amuse; I am chasing small projects, micropolitics, hunches, whims, fancies" (Halberstam, 2011, p.21).

## Armchair

*There is a good feeling experiencing access intimacy. It is a freeing, light, loving feeling... Sometimes access intimacy doesn't even mean that everything is 100% accessible. Sometimes it looks like both of you trying to create access as hard as you can with no avail in an ableist world. Sometimes it is someone just sitting and holding your hand while you both stare back at an inaccessible world (Mingus, 2017).*

Mia Mingus describes the experience of access intimacy as “sometimes it is someone just sitting and holding your hand while you both stare back at an inaccessible world” (ibid). This description has stayed with me. Like a hyperlink, it is embedded. I carry it with me. Her words, the example, both trouble and soothe me. I cannot shake it. *“Someone just sitting and holding your hand.”* I think a lot about the gesture happening here. What it does and can do through symbol and the tactile reality. There is a comfort, a knowing attentiveness, present in the hand holding here. I imagine how it might feel; not too loose, not too tight.

This kind of perfect hand hold, it requires maintenance, attention, a fostering. There is care present— in the maintenance, in the attention, in the fostering. This kind of hand holding, this moment of someone sitting and holding your hand, it illustrates so much of what softness does. The potential present in the moment of this caring gesture — the noticing that someone might need touch, the understanding and attending to the exasperation of the moment — and all the moments that led to this one— the gesture that communicates that kind feeling with, rather than for.

This kind of attentiveness requires a deep level of sensitivity to the nuances of individual experiences and contexts, and to the complex interconnections between individuals, communities, and environment. I want objects that feel like this. Alive with softness.



Fig. 1, *Armchair*, 2025, Douglas Fir plywood, down-filled cushions, plush fill, memory foam, fabric, 26" x 26" x 26"

I made the *Armchair* (Fig. 1) because of Mia Mingus' words. Because I wanted a hand to hold while I looked at an inaccessible world. The hands allow the chair to become more than a chair (even before it is sat in). It is a companion in its form/nature. It is a companion by design/in and of itself. This *Armchair* permits the user (sitter) to share in/ consider how I relate to objects, how I feel about furniture even when a piece of furniture doesn't have human-style hands for holding. But this anthropomorphising makes clear and evident the relational nature of my relationship with objects, the companionship I feel.

### **Influence**

The form is influenced by Wendy Jacob's 1999 *Squeeze Chair* Project (Fig. 2) which presents a chaise lounge replete with arms that inflate to squeeze the sitter. Jacob's *Squeeze Chair* was inspired by Temple Granden's *Hug Box* (or *Squeeze Machine*; 1965) that was developed to apply deep-touch pressure in order to calm the sensory sensitivity Granden herself experienced (and saw present in other Autistic individuals who required physical stimulation/ pressure to self-soothe).



Granden's *Hug Box* and Jacob's *Squeeze Chair* are but two examples of the innumerable ways disabled people are expert designers of our everyday life. Harkening back to Hamraie (2017), these two examples highlight the crip knowing-making that is disability expertise (Hartblay, 2020).<sup>43</sup> Overly simplistic understandings and outsider "expertise" become ultimately insufficient in accounting for the dynamic relationships between disabled people and their environments.

It has been argued that Granden's *Hug Box* not only accounts for neurodivergent sensory needs but exposes them as an expression of Autistic sensory difference. The *Hug Box* is successful beyond meeting Autistic people's needs for deep pressure by representing Autism as "a difference, rather than deficient, experience of the world" (Almanza, 2016, p.164), exceeding overly simplistic understandings of sensory difference and thereby revealing the dynamic relationships between neurodivergent people and their environments.



Fig. 2, Wendy Jacob, *Squeeze Chair*, 1995, Dimensions variable, photo by Lothar Schnepf

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<sup>43</sup> "Crip being and knowing are inseparable from crip ways of making and acting. In other words, crip "knowing-making" (Hamraie 2017) is a commitment to right action through changing existing material arrangements, not endorsing the nondisabled, assimilationist norm." (Mills & Sanchez, 2023, p.446).

The arms of the *Armchair* were weighted; not with a single material, but with a unique combination of three (weighted pellets, plush fill, and memory foam). Allowing the hands to keep its form, but still soft enough to hold and be held. The pillows were down filled so that they are fluffy— filling the spaces between the body and the chair to provide the sensation of being squeezed in place. The chair was sized purposefully below the anthropometric average because I am below the average, and this is a chair where I fit.

### **You are how you sit.**

Witold Rybczynski wrote, “*The way we choose to sit, and what we choose to sit on, says a lot about us: our values, our tastes, the things we hold dear*” (as cited in Friedman, 2016). I want to be soft, so I made this chair as an embodied gesture. A place to sit with hands to hold.



*Fig. 3, Armchair hands in action, June 2025*





*Fig. 4, Armchair in use, June 7th, 2025.*



*Fig. 5, Armchair (sideview), June 2025*

*In the wake of trauma, people often engage in (seemingly) counter-intuitive behaviours in response. I don't know if it's some kind of attempt at control, or a desire to become that thing you hate, or...*

*I wanted to be scooped up. Cradled like a baby. I thought of Temple Grandin. I thought of cows. I thought of that Wendy Jacobs chair. I recalled all of the targeted ads for weighted blankets the algorithm had delivered me over the last several years.*

*I am not alone in my desire to be squeezed when the world feels much too much. But I am sick of the world feeling much too much (and I would like to feel alone). I thought I wanted something that could squeeze — like Grandin, or Jacobs, or the cows. But when I felt the too-muchness again, and I let the sickness at the feelings stay, I realised I didn't only want comfort. I didn't mostly want comfort.*

*I wanted revenge.*

*So, in response, please coronate me as king. As absolute monarch; judge, jury, executioner. I will make a throne from which I may enact my royal edicts. The arms of the throne like arms of my own— replete with hands, there for holding, when I need a squeeze.*

*The chair will fit my body, comfortably.*

*The kind of customisations available only to the ruling class— I'm a ruler now. Revenge makes strangers of us. This throne's foreign land, my home now.*

*In the hand at the end of the arm of the chair— in the location where one may typically find a cupholder on a camping chair— there will be a hole. From the void, a skyward facing nozzle emerges, firmly fastened in place.*

*A hose, attached to the nozzle, is connected to a foot pump at the other end (the kind most often used when inflating an air mattress or pool floaty).*

*There I will sit. Pump firmly underfoot.*

*The contours of my customised throne meeting every contour of my body.*

*A bag of balloons on my lap.*

*The regal metaphor reaching full realisation as over-ear hearing protection is fitted a-top my head.*

*Crowned as king.*

*Senses secured, I will exact my revenge. Filling balloon after balloon with air. Holding some between the pressure of my hands forced together, until they explode. Until their red siren song no longer bears any weight for me, no longer forces my body into revolt.*

*Until I have oppressed my oppressor, become that which I hate.*

*I will wear myself down, force my body to fit. The kind of “if you can't beat 'em, join 'em” posture required of this role.*

*Coronation complete.*

*Will I still need a squeeze?*

*Will anyone even recognise me, even dare to offer to scoop me up?*

## Chest Cabinet

As a neurodivergent person, accessing services and navigating institutions requires me to constantly make myself vulnerable, baring the most intimate aspects of myself to be taken seriously. How often are students expected to ‘simplify’ and perform a more predictable version of our embodied reality?<sup>44</sup> Prove I am disabled enough, impacted enough by all the tiny tyrannies of this system to legitimise my experience. I am expected to harden myself to fit into these rigid structures, to present as a strong and assured self-advocate.

Simultaneously, I must open myself up, offer explanations and disclosures to be perceived as *disabled enough* or *deserving* of accommodations (make myself vulnerable, make myself soft). To be taken seriously, I must immediately close up (turn off the vulnerability, harden myself). There is an endless back and forth — too open, too closed (revealing too much makes me vulnerable, while revealing too little makes me invisible).<sup>45</sup>

My position is shaped by constant disclosures—of queerness, of disability. I disclose to be believed, to be seen, and to gain access to spaces sanctioned by institutions, family, and strangers alike. I am compelled to narrate my existence, not only because I do not seem to fit the identities I claim but also because suppressing myself feels unbearable, as if the weight of restraint might consume me. The *Chest Cabinet* (Fig. 6) emerges from that relentless impulse—the need to disclose, to make visible, and to refuse erasure.

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<sup>44</sup> "To use the third person in discussing disabled people would be to impose a distancing between myself and my subject that rings false. It also would run counter to this notion of "claiming crip," denying the possibility of a deep and abiding connection to the identities, bodies, minds, and practices discussed here" (Kafer, 2013, p. 19).

<sup>45</sup> "Some students felt that during self-advocacy there were expectations or desires for them to be visibly and physically disabled and to provide extensive explanation if their disability was less overtly perceptible and 'verifiable' to others. Students with invisible disabilities, especially mental health disabilities, often encountered delegitimization of their need for support and/or expectations of disclosure and explanation" (Woolf & De Bie, 2022).



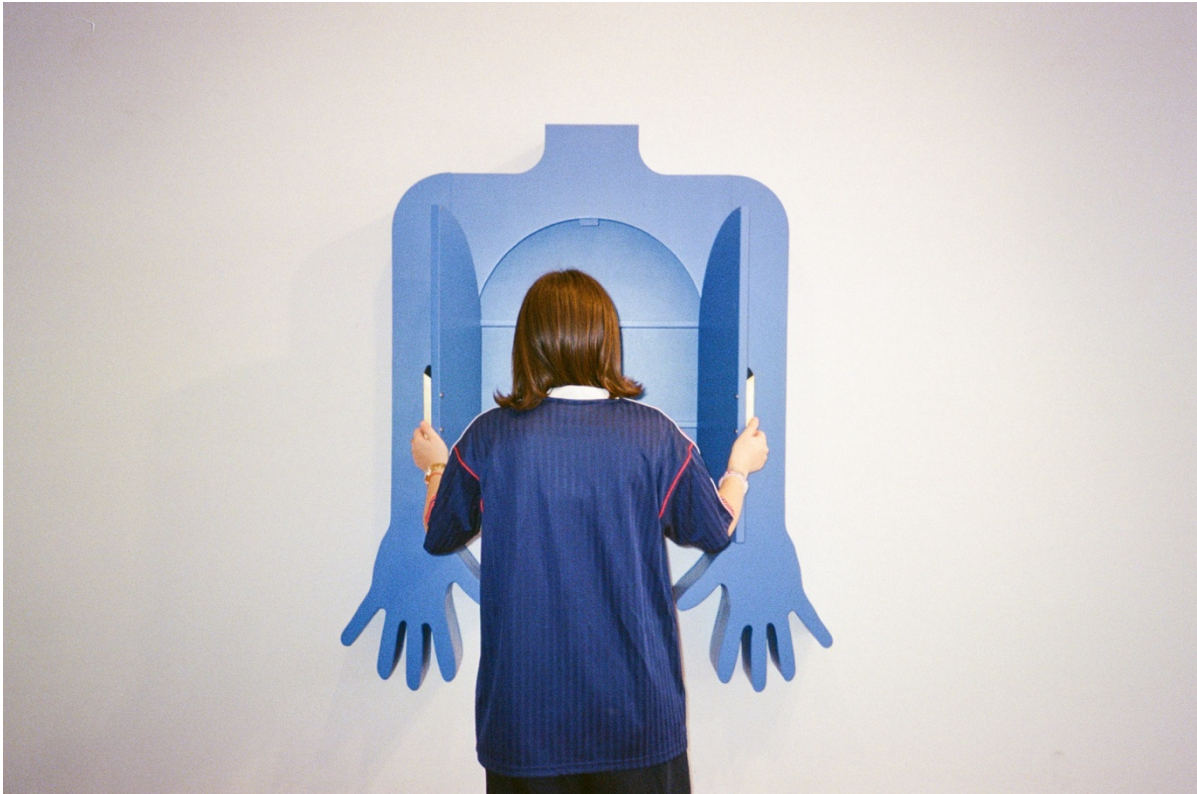


Fig. 6, *Chest Cabinet* (held open), June 2025

I made the *Chest Cabinet* because of how it feels to have to open and close myself and how I want to share that experience with others through the tacit experience of a cabinet. We intuitively know to open and close doors, to reach for cabinet pulls (Fig.11).



Fig. 7, *Chest Cabinet* and friend, June 7th, 2025

## Influence

All my work, and this cabinet in particular, has been deeply impacted by the French artist and maker, Nicola L. (b.1932-d. 2018). While formally trained as a painter, she was compelled more towards artistic formats that connect people more directly to her work; sculpture, performance, and furniture. Nicola's functional artwork presents critical questions about equality attached to specific political movements, specifically feminists/antiracist political activism and resistance and is deeply influenced by 1960's hippie movement utopian principles (Martin & Sosa, 2023).



Fig. 8, Nicola L., *Les Amants*, 1969, pine plywood, 18 3/4" x 46" x 83"



Fig. 9, Nicola L., *Orange Femme Commode*, 1969/2008, Courtesy Alison Jacques, London and Nicola L. Collection and Archive

Nicola L.'s practice of rethinking everyday things in a way that both engages and defies their status as objects has had an immense influence on me. In particular, the often oversized, exaggerated, even caricatured use of the human form (*Fig. 8*) and how she repeated (and repeated) this use and exploration throughout her life—exploring materiality, aesthetics, and relationships within domestic spaces. While remaining functional, her furniture became performance; open the drawers of a dresser in the shape of a stereotypical female torso (*Fig. 9*) or witness her ongoing preoccupation with heads (*Fig. 10*).

*“The contour-profile—always the same—of a giant head started being my obsession in 1986. It came after a drama in my life (probably the only positive thing about crises is that they make you come out of yourself” (as cited in Marckwald, A. 2025).*

Nicola L.’s use of a repetitive motif as a response to crises which caused her to “come out of [her]self” recalls Butler’s ideas of becoming undone, which describes how grief moves us outside ourselves—“passion, grief, rage...transports us, undo us, implicate us in lives that are not our own, sometimes fatally, irreversibly (2004, p.20).

I do not wish to put words in Nicola’s mouth here, rather to speak to my own experience. It was my own grief and search for understanding that led me to Nicola L.. It was in searching for makers and artists, in history, who stretched the definitional boundaries of functional objects, and who questioned prevailing notions of how we ought to be in the world, that I discovered Nicola L.. In her, I found a companion who was equally curious and exploratory about humanity and the human form.

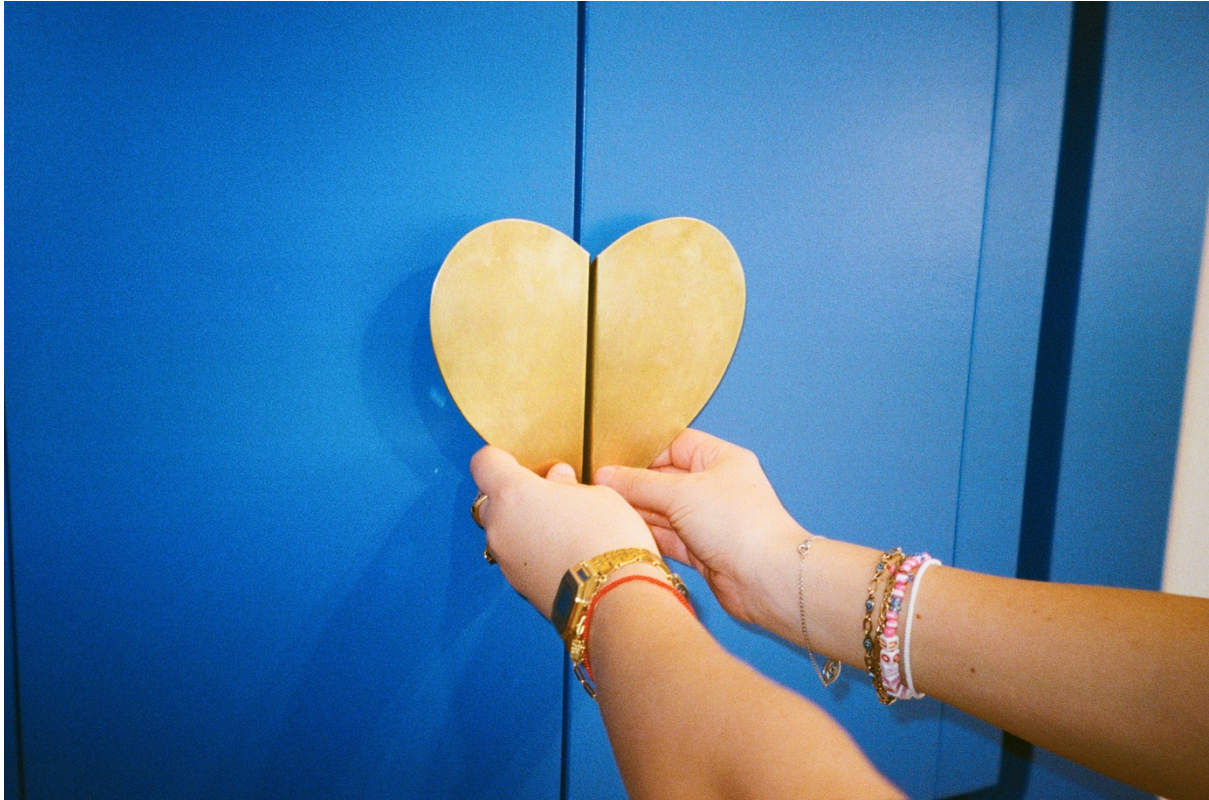


“Let’s face it, we are undone by one another and if we are not, we are missing something (Butler, 2004, p.19). Grief has undone me, so has encountering the works of Nicola L. I owe her a great deal, notably, the space she opened by making it permissible to obsess over a singular, didactic, motif (for her, it’s heads; for me, hands), as well as demonstrating it is possible to be at once serious in critique and deeply playful in expression.

*Fig. 10, Nicola L., Head Library, 1996/2013, wood, 84” x 64” x 12”, courtesy of Alison Jacques, London, Nicola L. Collection and Archive*



It has become intuitive for me to know when to open myself up and close myself off again. I can feel the draw, the atmosphere of a room or a moment, the implicit demand to put myself on display (account for my difference, perform disability) or to close myself off (stop being too emotional, too needy, too vocal).



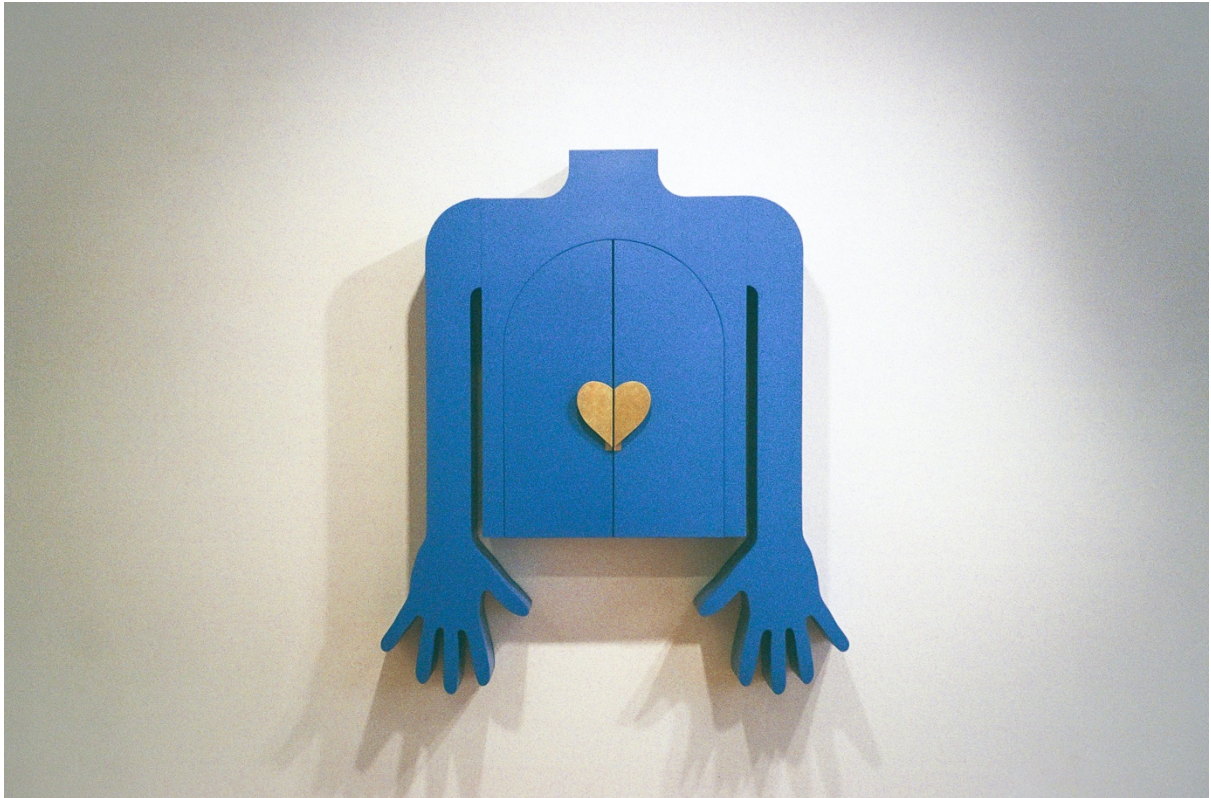
*Fig. 6, Chest Cabinet Pulls, 2025, brass, 3" x 6" (each)*

As with beating our bullies to the punchline when it comes to naming ourselves queer or crip, with this cabinet I am putting myself on display. Making myself vulnerable – allowing the user to open me up and force me closed— purposefully and with permission, before someone else gets the chance to.

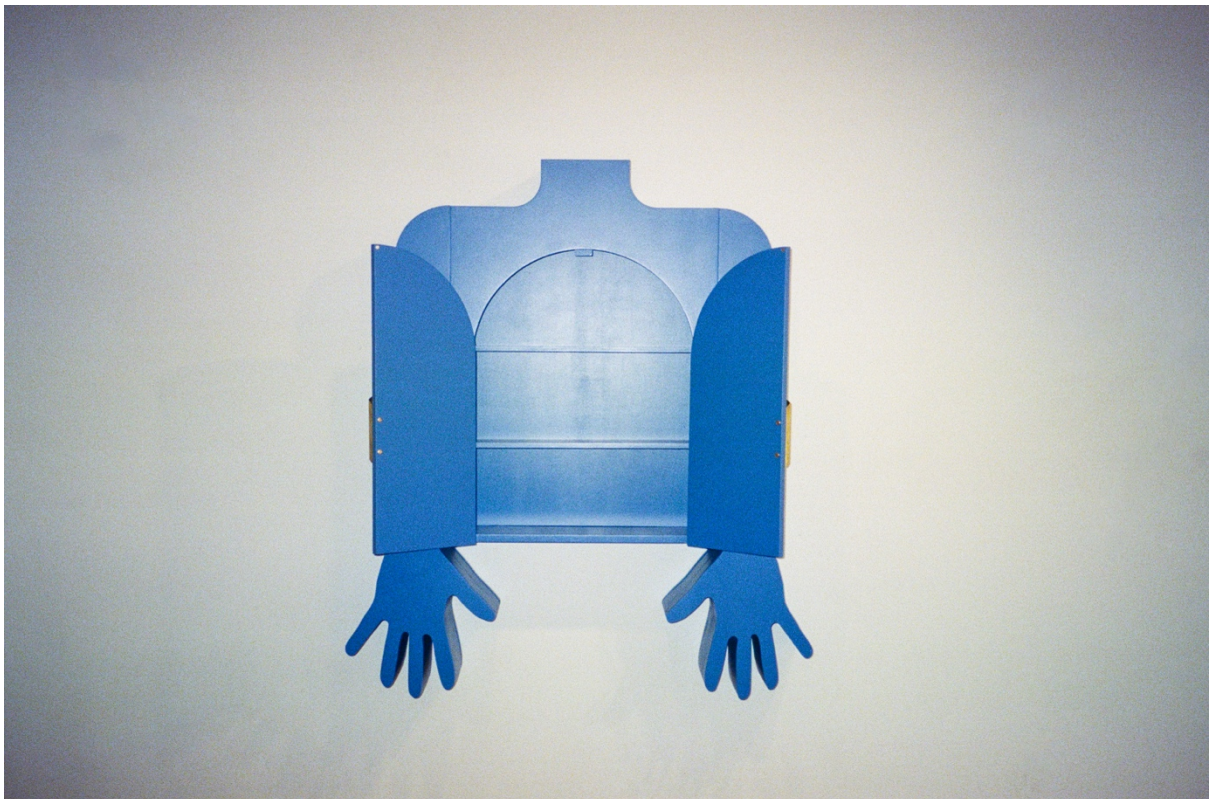
The arched “doorway” was designed to convey the shape of a chest cavity. The brass heart-shaped pulls, which literally break the heart in two as the cabinet doors are opened (but always mend back together when closed), illustrates the heartbreaking/heart-bearing process of disclosure. The hinges selected are hidden as to not interfere with the chest-like quality of the piece. They are also soft-close— no loud noises here.

Here you can participate in this feeling, open my chest and then close me back up again...again and again.





*Fig. 8, Chest Cabinet (closed), 2025, Baltic birch plywood, polystyrene foam, brass, 42" x 32" x 8"*



*Fig. 7, Chest Cabinet (opened), 2025, Baltic birch plywood, polystyrene foam, brass, 42" x 32" x 8"*

## Buddy Desk

Traditional accessibility accommodations are rigid. These supporting structures can be understood as rather “hard” in nature, as documented decisions and delineations; write an exam in this separate room, receive time and a half (*but don't forget to submit your paperwork 2-weeks before*). Yet, what does a standard accommodation model offer people in non-standardised settings (like a wood shop or art studio)? How could we adapt or imagine a shop space otherwise? How might institutions operate otherwise (beyond standardisation)? Can those within these spaces account for difference, and how can this be done without burning out the “good actors”?

The desk I made envisions a more expansive view of accommodations and the need for “soft” understandings and practices. These practices often do not require the newest or flashiest technology; in fact, many of us are searching for supports that are quite mundane in comparison. However, the standardised model remains intact, proposing “solutions” when we are looking for support. *The Buddy Desk* (Fig. 14) exemplifies the ways many disabled students expertly implement this soft accessibility in our everyday lives, filling the gaps between institutional offerings and our direct needs. Thinking beyond “conventional” accommodations validates these practices as valuable and critical — even if they are not the tools or tactics offered to us by *experts*.<sup>46</sup>

Somewhere throughout my education, as life became more online and the Internet became a central component of the classroom, I realized that I hate emails. I know we *all* hate emails, but I *reallllly* hate emails. I almost dropped out of school because of emails. Emails have often brought me to tears. Emails are hard (both difficult, and hard in the sense I defined earlier as a catchall term for all that is bad and wrong in the world). To receive an email is to receive an accompanying sense of dread — will I correctly interpret the intended tone of the sender, will my response (*if I can respond*)

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<sup>46</sup> “As a form of resistance to these ableist expectations, students described their own 'better way' of negotiating self-advocacy and disability on campus. This 'better way' offers opportunities for 'politicizing' self-advocacy by recognizing ableism and the harms of the self-advocacy model, affirming disabled student knowledge and community, and enacting their visions for institutional change. Politicizing self-advocacy moves instead towards disabled students as full partners ... based on their collective lived expertise and strategic practices” (Woolf & De Bie, 2022).

be interpreted as I intend (I do not always consider the dread in so many words as above, but it *feels bad*)? I want to be able to reply to emails in a timely manner, because some emails are good and helpful, or from trusted or useful sources, and some emails are important, requiring urgent attention.

It feels like so many people send so many emails every day and it's a miracle if I even manage one or two. On a good day, I can manage to look at my email inbox, craft a response to an email that feels important, and then have my response proofread (usually by my wife, or wait until my next occupational therapy appointment, who I sought out to specifically aid with emails). However, often I receive an email notification and cannot bring myself to check, the dread of it all sets in and I am paralysed.<sup>47</sup>

Yet, the longer one waits to respond, the harder it becomes. Emails (and other technology) have created a world that expects constant access, unending connectivity, instant gratification, and therefore unreasonable expectations for response times. Frequently, the assumption is that emails are easy, they shouldn't take up much time, you *should* be able to multi-task; check message as they come in and quickly dash off a response. All while working on other tasks simultaneously. Multi-tasking, however, is a bit of a misnomer (at least for me). My experience has not been that I can do tasks multiply (side by side, in tandem), rather, my issue is with, what I call, switch-tasking— switching back and forth (and back and forth and back and forth) between the multiple things I *ought* to be attending to. This expectation of being able to constantly transition from cognitive context to cognitive context is not something I can do. I struggle with transitions of any sort, they are not only difficult, but overstimulating and disruptive.

Emails present information overload, inboxes are disorganised chaos with emails coming in as they are received with little structure to make sense of the visual chaos

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<sup>47</sup> This is referred to as task paralysis; the feeling of being completely overwhelmed, stuck, and unable to do the work required. This feeling of seeming impossibility to bring yourself to get started on a task reinforces shame on two levels. First, you probably judge yourself for feeling immobile and secondly, you regret not working on what needs to be done (Saline, 2023).

and clutter, which also leads to decision paralysis, unsure of how best to address the issue. There are simply too many unexpected messages and random request that arrive faster (and demand urgency) than I can possibly address. All of this is sensory overload is mixed with a deep sense of shame and overwhelm at being unable to “keep up” in the ways (it seems) everyone else is. Emails are, consequently, avoided. This further compounds the issue, and means that sometimes I miss really important things — government notifications, dates and deadlines, but also kind emails from friends, event invitations, and academic opportunities I would very much like to take part in. The double-edged sword of avoiding emails to keep up with the other demands of everyday life, while also having to use emails to be aware of nearly anything (especially in institutional settings) is one of the great tragedies of my life (and, believe me, I am not overstating this for effect).

Knowing this about myself spawned the understanding that what I required to be a successful student in this digital age, was not more time to complete assignments or writing an exam in a separate room, but support sustaining the demands of emails. What I needed was someone to sit with me once a week while I faced the dread of opening my inbox. Someone to make me do my emails— someone who could be there to boss me around. This, unfortunately, was not an accommodation that could be offered institutionally. Sometimes the help offered is not actually helpful. To this end, I resolved to solve my own problem. I made my own email tutoring service in the form of the Buddy Desk (*Fig. 14*), which embodies the concept of *body doubling*, providing a permanent “buddy” sitting next to the open seat, creating the soft accountability of another body<sup>48</sup>. The accommodation I had asked for but couldn’t be offered.

I made a little desk where I fit.

***Email responses still forthcoming.***

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<sup>48</sup> “Body doubling operates on the idea that simply having another person present can significantly boost one’s ability to focus and complete tasks. [...] The technique does not require the body double to interact or assist with the task; their presence alone creates the environmental conditions that encourage productivity” (Scott, 2024).



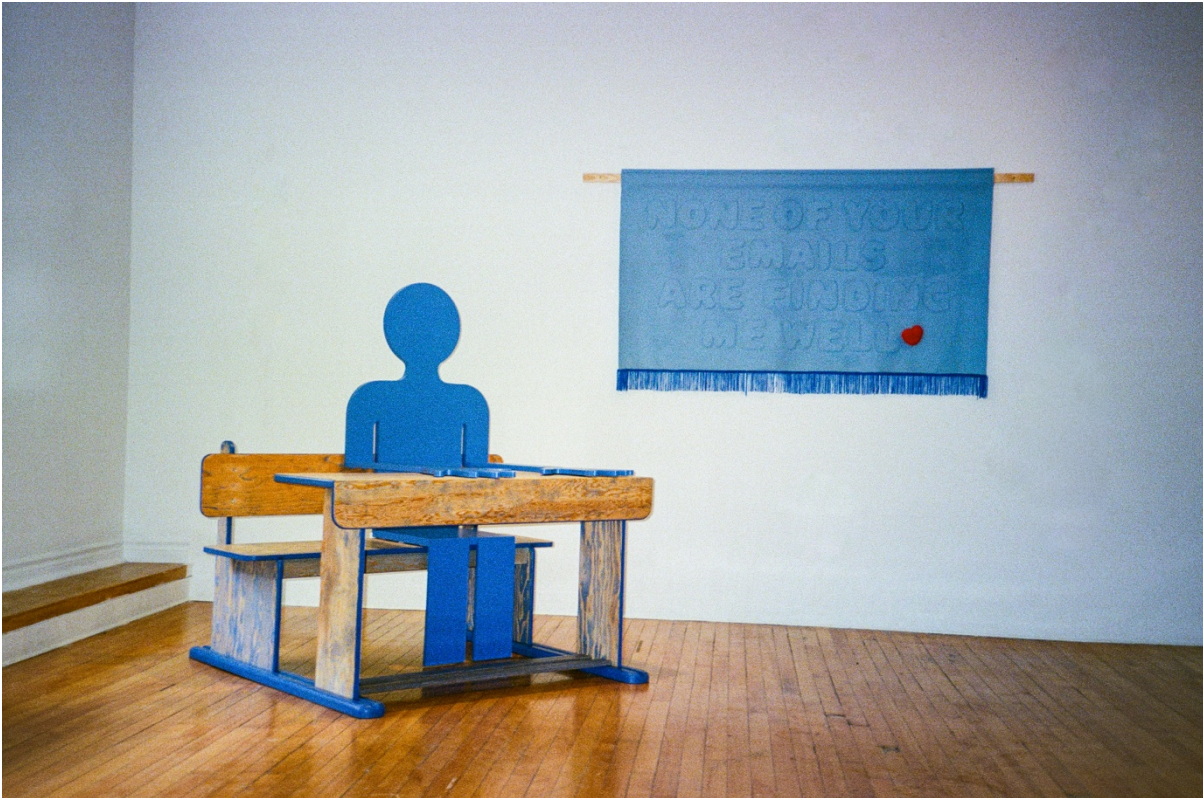


Fig. 9, *Buddy Desk*, 2025, Douglas fir plywood, MDF, 48" x 48" x 26"

## Influence

There are movements and methodologies, past and present, that have prioritized questions over solutions and used design as a mechanism of dissent which have been of great encouragement to me. The Buddy Desk was influenced by the spirit of Radical Design movements from the 1960s & 70s. Beginning among young graduates of architecture schools in Italy (and then expanding to elsewhere) together rejected the rationalism and functionalism of the Bauhaus' industrial way of thinking. Protesting the ideological confines of "form follows function," and the established taste in design and architecture, the movement was not concerned with mass producing goods. It wasn't about economic *success*, it was about getting the ideas out, with the aim of subverting the established social, political, and design norms of the period. The objects associated with these movements were driven by ideas, while remaining functional (to some extent). "If there was consensus among the Radicals about the nature of their collective undertaking, it had something to do with mutability. The Radicals seemed to agree that we should all be able to alter our

personal environments however we would like. There is a broad swath of the Radical thinking that was dedicated to the power of rearrangement” (Jacobs, 2020).

Radical Design is also often referred to as Anti-Design. This name shares the group’s commitment to subverting the ideologies and expectations instilled in them by their educational institutions, one object at a time. Countering the dominant orthodoxy as these groups did through refusals to participate in the market-driven practices being proliferated at the time provides a well-worn path of critical scholarship and critical making I now work in the legacy of.

Particularly, the critical reflections posed by Alessandro Mendini’s series of works titled, *Objects for Spiritual Use*. This included a chair named *Lassù* (meaning, a chair “hard to have access to”), a domestic object that, once conquered, “offered anyone the chance to be a protagonist, transforming one’s own home into a stage or a

cabinet of curiosities” (Ciagà & Mendini, 2011, p.24) This chair perched atop steps was set on fire for the cover of the Italian magazine Casabella (no. 391, 1974)(Fig 15), of which Mendini said, “I wanted to show that even objects have a life, and that it can be tragic” (Ciagà & Mendini, 2011, p.25).



Fig. 10, Casabella cover, 1974



I made the *Buddy Desk* because all the words and promises of accessibility services were insufficient, inaccessible. I needed support and I had to make it. Had to engage in the self-advocacy beyond words. I required something practical, utilitarian. My craft-based education equipped me with a knowledge base of typologies and vernaculars as much as it did with conventions, standards and anthropometrics. These typologies are concepts, words, which have become a repertoire from which to pull solutions – seating, surfaces, cabinetry.

A desk falls under the category of task-based furniture. As the name implies, these objects are task specific (think: a wheelie desk/ computer chair as the most common example). A desk is task-specific, action oriented, precisely what I required. I also knew I needed companionship.

As I was drafting countless strongly worded emails to accessibility services, and engaged in subsequent back and forth email exchanges, all the words came up short. I needed a someone not only a concept. I needed the intimacy of being known. Understood.<sup>49</sup>



Fig. 11, *Buddy Desk* (accompanied by my mom). June 7th, 20025

<sup>49</sup> "Orientations, then, are about the intimacy of bodies and their dwelling places" (Ahmed, 2008, p. 8)



The form of the *Buddy Desk* was specifically designed to be constraining (no rocking back and forth here!). The colour and surface quality were considered for how they transported the sitter to the typical school desks of the past (*Fig. 16*). The wood was purposefully soft, recalling the childhood urges to dig one's fingernails into the table, carving out your initials, letting everyone know you were there. The size of the body double is outsized, oversized because I needed an outsized presence, a larger-than-life companion—a body double who would keep me in line.

A minor object included in the exhibition was a wall hung banner. Measuring 5 feet in length and 3 feet in height, the banner reads, *None of Your Emails are Finding Me Well* (*Fig. 17*). The banner recalls old church wall hangings and championship sports banners hung in gyms. It has bright blue tassels that dangle from its bottom edge, they sway as someone brushes past, they ask to be touched. The banner illustrates the importance of words in the way that I work. The medium is the message kind of stuff. It was displayed behind the *Buddy Desk* (*Fig. 14*) driving home the desire behind its creation.



*Fig. 12, None of Your Emails Are Finding Me Well Banner, 2025, Wool fabric, polyester tassel, 5' x 3'*

During the second wave feminist movements of the 1970s, textile/fibre arts such as embroidery, knitting, and crochet, were weaponized as subversive tools in the take down of traditional, male-centric art institutions and ways of knowing.

Historically, textiles have been labelled 'women's work' and dismissed as inferior to pursuits such as painting and sculpture ("high" art). The 1984 book, *The Subversive Stitch*, by feminist psychotherapist Roszika Parker traces these practices of protest and activism, examining the marginalization of women's work in the hierarchy of art and craft. In recent years the re-appropriation of traditionally "feminine craft" techniques has played a critical role in feminist queer and trans activism, arts, and discourse.

The historical context informed my decision to fabricate and include the banner. Honouring, through material and method, the legacies of the queer and trans people who came before me, who strategically took up space, who made a way, who have shaped and informed the fibres of who I am today.

*I bought myself a pair of socks today. I usually only wear very specific socks. They need to feel a certain way. They are not polyester. They do not have embroidered bits or decorative details. The sticky-outtie bits tickle my feet.*

*But, I bought myself a pair of socks full of sticky-outtie bits. I had to. The ends justify the means, or something like that.*

*I can make do with the discomfort if there is a justifiable reason.*

*The socks say “none of your emails are finding me well.”*

*I’ll have a second appointment with my new occupational therapist soon.*

*She’s trying to help me get better at emails, so that I don’t have to drop out of my Master’s program.*

*I think I’ll wear my new socks. I wonder if she’ll notice...*

*I’m not sure an OT will help but I’m trying to do something.*

*What no one tells you when applying to school is that even if you have a completed portfolio and comprehensive research proposal, the endless stream of digitally based communications will threaten to derail it all.*

**ALL THESE EMAILS**

**AND NONE OF THEM ARE FINDING ME WELL.**

*That’s for sure.*

## Exhibition

*“I think many adults (and I among them) are trying, in our own work, to keep faith with vividly remembered promises made to ourselves in child-hood; promises to make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make the tacit things explicit; to smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled and with the relative freedom of adulthood, to challenge queer-eradicating impulses frontally where they are to be so challenged” (Sedgwick, 2007, p. 3).*

The exhibition for *I Have Thought A Lot About This* was held on June 7, 2025, at the OCADU Graduate Gallery.

The exhibit happened for one evening only. I (admittedly somewhat selfishly) wanted everyone there all at once. The exhibition was held on a Saturday, outside of “school” hours. As you have read earlier in this document, my relationship with school remains complicated, so the scheduling was deliberate – I needed for this to be on my own time. I also wanted the event to be held at a time where the greatest amount of people could be there, *together*, all at once. This thesis, and certainly the exhibition, is not an individual undertaking – it is about, because of, and for, community. Having these objects be experienced collectively with the people who have offered me so much softness, was of utmost importance to me. My vision for the exhibition was to offer softness in return, through my objects, and in the form of a party.

Interrupting frameworks of scarcity and individualism endemic to the organizational principles of academia, is softness. So, one night, everyone, all together in celebration! That was the goal and what happened. It was soft, it was joyful. A slightly sweaty room, full of people I love, a playlist and borrowed speakers, plus my favourite snacks and drinks set the backdrop for my objects to undergo a Pinocchio transformation– *from puppets to real boys*. Brought to life, as friends with Cheeto stained fingers and a wine glass in hand, sat next to the blue body of the *Buddy Desk* and gleefully looked around (careful to avoid orange-stained fingers contacting the wood).

***Words as objects, object as words***

***Alive with softness as bodies touched bodies, touching hands.<sup>50</sup>***

***Softness operationalized***

***Acting as orientation device.***

These are everyday objects: a chair, a desk, a cabinet. Yet, while their everyday nature allows them to appear familiar, they remain somehow *other*. The corporal additions eschew their usefulness. I observed this tension as people approached each object – their eyes scanning the room for someone to grant permission to sit, touch, open or engage. I enjoyed this moment, watching how, as the night went on, people who had initially sought permission began offering it to others. In this tactile way, these objects extended an invitation that a purely functional object cannot. This sparked a chain reaction of softness, where visitors were invited to engage and, in turn, offered the same invitation to others as they grew more comfortable in the space.

An experience I did not anticipate was how deeply people would connect their experiences of misfitting to my own. As they read the exhibition companion booklet, people shared many stories about their own experiences in schools, or with the dread of emails. Sometimes hearing this felt heavy, but we were also able to laugh at the absurdity of it all (and that was cathartic). In hindsight, by sharing my own stories and experiences, and then having people interact with those experiences, there was permission to hold one's own experiences of misfitting. I watched, in real time, people feel the world around them soften, and in turn, offer softness to themselves.

To help visitors orient themselves in the space and provide some added context beyond the physical objects themselves, I made a companion booklet to the exhibition. I printed 75 copies and positioned them on a freestanding display shelf

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<sup>50</sup> "Touch is the sensory mode that integrates our experience of the world with that of ourselves" (Pallasmaa, 2013, p.11).



with a small picture light hung above (Fig. 18, Fig. 19) so that the booklets were immediately visible upon entering the gallery space.



Fig. 13, View of Exhibition and Companion Booklet Wall, June 2025

The booklet contains a selection of photographs from my personal archives, a description and drawing of each piece exhibited, and a distillation of some of the writing from this thesis document (especially the writing included here in blue). I was nervous to include the booklet component, in all honesty. But the exhibition felt incomplete without it, devoid of context. And yet, I was tempted to omit the context and simply allow people to reach their own conclusions because sharing that much of myself felt like baring my soul. Thank goodness I didn't though. The companion booklet became the critical tie that brought everything together in that gallery space. People, objects, words, and the intimacy of being known.

*The place of theory is in finding a way to live, in asking how to make the world a softer place, in making the world a softer place.*



Fig. 14, *Companion Booklet* (closeup), 2025

During the exhibition, *I Have Thought A Lot About This*, I was able to witness my hopes, ideas, and central question (*how can we make the world a softer place?*) come to life. This question is ultimately an invitation to engage in, reflect on, and notice one's position and surroundings at the moment of asking. It is grandiose, purposefully — the way manifestos have this way of making sweeping statements that feel absolutist, even propagandistic. The question, *how can we make the world a softer place?* began as a catch-all question to myself. It became an incessant internal monologue, a way of operating in the world, and a personal manifesto of sorts — guiding my thinking towards the furniture I made.

*I am complexly interconnected, interdependent.*

*Maria Puig de la Bellacasa writes that a self is “wholly inconceivable without the multitude of relations that make possible the worlds we think with” (2017, p. 69).*

*Sara Ahmed writes, “Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before ... Citations can be ... bricks: they are the materials through which, from which, we create our dwellings” (2017, p.16).*

*I am building with bricks, creating a dwelling. Ever under construction. Filled with the footnotes of all my relations, the text ever augmenting in response to newly added in-text citations.*

*I invite you to visit, to stay awhile, run your fingers along the bricks from which I am built, and am building.*

*I hope you ask questions about each brick’s origin, so I can introduce you to everyone I have ever met.*

*I can tell you about my mom, about her joy-filled smile that has always shined the very brightest in any room she has ever entered and how now, I try to smile bright to honour her.*

*That brick has sparkles for sure.*

*I can tell you about my wife, the smartest person I’ve ever met. I’ll tell you about how strong and sturdy she is, making everyone she has ever met stronger and studier along her way. That brick would be a corner stone. Sturdiest brick in the house.*

*Oh, I could tell you about my brother, and how he can quite literally take apart a whole old house and rebuild the place with his very own hands. What would his brick look like?*

*Or, I could tell you about the man in the thrift store earlier today, who approached me just to show me the treasures he had collected. I can tell you about my endless interactions with the softness of this world, and the hardness too. The people, the things, the moments, the books, that are building me. This is not a list, it’s a web of relations. Each part, each brick, touching one part, intersecting with another part— the dwelling is alive, ever morphing, in response to all of these relations.*



## Manifesto for Making the World a Softer Place

*“What is at stake here is who explains my story and who explains the story of people like me. What is important is who is the author of our individual and collective identities, who determines whether we are narrative creatures, whether we are living beings in rhetorical bodies, whether we can call ourselves human” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 21).*

I wanted, I needed, the opportunity to share my own story. I share these stories not because they're exceptional – everyone has a story of how they came to do what they do – but because they paint a picture. These stories forge an intimate bond, they immediately connect you, dear reader, to me. They form the narrative, re-trace the lines of how we arrived to where we are today. Affirming our connection, these stories make possible the knowing and being known, being *undone*, by one another.

Craft cultures and practices have always been idealist — rejecting life as it is and insisting life can be lived another way. The idealism and hope central to utopian endeavours is central to craft as well (both contain an undeniable, maybe even contagious, optimism at their core). Dreaming of and creating the world *otherwise* have always been two sides of the same coin.

My time training as a furniture maker reified this. Providing me with concrete skills to make the world, and my world, *a softer place*. Learning to upholster, literally making soft surfaces. Learning how to build things, and then constructing countless peg rails, hanging hooks all over my house as a way to accommodate my unending struggles with object permanence.<sup>51</sup> Hooks for keys, hooks for bags, hooks for clothes that are not-yet-dirty but not-quite-clean, hooks for utensils, for tools, or for hanging papers with notes I do not want to forget.

While traditional models of scholarship aim to separate knowledge from the body that created it, this thesis locates the body, specifically my body, as a source of

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<sup>51</sup> Object permanence refers to the capacity to understand that an object or person continues to exist even when they're not visible/ outside of one's field of perception.

wisdom to be recognized and celebrated. *I Have Thought A Lot About This* enabled **words to become objects, and objects to become words**, in a never-ending cycle of theory and practice. Considering and interpreting academic texts alongside my lived experiences, as I worked to make the world a softer place, opened realms of possibility that I previously had not encountered.

This document started with possibility, as Judith Butler asked, “what does the thought of the possible do for those for whom survival is most urgent” (2004, p. 29)? When I began this project by asking, *how can we make the world a softer place?* issues of survival felt ever-present, critical. This insistence on the possibility of life being otherwise logically arises as one is committed to the work of crafting new worlds. There is a commitment to the thought of the possible, and to materializing that possibility.

*“The handmade configures utopic relations between bodies and objects, materializing alternative modes of affective economies and networks of relationality”* (Vaccaro, 2010, p. 257).

Working with my hands, continuing to lean into and lean on my craft-based education, embodied the process of insisting on softness. Asking *how can we make the world a softer place* may have started as obsession, but through this process became something habitual. A continual, yet conscious, undertaking to affirm that *it is possible* for the world to be otherwise – that it is indeed possible for the world to fit itself to me (and not always the other way around). In and through making the objects of *I Have Thought A Lot About This*, the critical fantasy of softness becomes the opportunity to conceptualise a liveable, a possible, life.

Ann Cvetkovich proposes that “habit can be a mechanism for building new ways of being in the world because it belongs to the domain of the ordinary, to activities that are not spectacular or unusual but instead arise from everyday life” (2012, p. 191). By habitually asking, *how can we make the world a softer place?*, the question

became a personal manifesto of sorts.<sup>52</sup> Manifestos play with utopian possibilities and therefore offer the queerest form of invitation to think about our lives differently and to project that possibility onto the future (Muñoz, 2009).<sup>53</sup>

The works of this exhibition simultaneously occupy the realm of material reality and of mental invitation. The familiarity of the forms, in tension with the peculiarity of their presentation, works to keep questions alive while remaining open and inviting. The decision to fabricate objects in this way is to pursue softness, always acknowledging our embodied experiences and nature. As Juhani Pallasmaa emphasises, “lived reality always fuses observation, memory, and fantasy into the lived existential experience” (2012, p. 230).

I return to the question of *how we can make the world a softer place?* I am trained as a craftsperson, and craft is about showing not telling. Have I showed you here? Can you see? “The ultimate hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make that could just as easily make differently” (Graeber, 2016, p. 53). *How can we make the world a softer place?* The answer to the question is to keep asking the question. As a reminder to do so, I have provided you with the following—

### **A MANIFESTO<sup>54</sup> FOR MAKING THE WORLD A SOFTER PLACE**

- 1. Ask, “how can we make the world a softer place?”**
- 2. Act as if it is possible to radically transform the world.**
- 3. Ask the question again. respond again. and again, and again.**
- 4. DO IT ALL THE TIME.**
- 5. Ask other people this question, teach them to ask it too.**
- 6. Return to number one, repeat the cycle, again and again and again.<sup>55</sup>**

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<sup>52</sup> Manifestos are described as “infectious, contagious,” as deeply disinterested in “rational back-and-forth discourse”; a manifesto “invites disorientation and distorts time” (Fahs 2020, p. 5-6).

<sup>53</sup> “The here and now is simply not enough. Queerness should and could be about a desire for another way of being in both the world and time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough” (Muñoz, 2009).

<sup>54</sup> “Good manifestos . . . do not claim to know things *for all time*; they only claim to know things *for this moment*” (Fahs, 2020, p. 4).

<sup>55</sup> Manifestos, in this queer framing, are relational—formed in relation to this moment—rather than prescriptive; they are about process rather than outcome (Kafer, 2023, p. 189).

For many of us, the thought of even asking the question – *how to make the world a softer place* – has not been possible because the pressure to fit ourselves into the rigid structures of this world have been ever-present. I was transformed when I encountered softness and when I began to ask for it. I want others to be transformed too. This is how we make the world a softer place.

## End

The objects of *I Have Thought A Lot About This* integrated form, function, materiality, and playfulness to present possibility, and ultimately, to posit the question most important since the inception of this project—*how can we make the world a softer place?* I have provided you here, dear reader, a roadmap in the form of a manifesto that you may follow moving forward as you ask this question too.

This furniture I made became more than utilitarian objects relegated to the background of our lives and living spaces (it really cannot blend in). By making this furniture deliberately queer in orientation and aesthetic, the pieces become an invitation – to understand (me), to experience softness, and to ask *how we can make the world a softer place?*

They are the beckoning of a possible life.

I began this project in need of softness and in search of possibility. While this need felt deeply urgent and deeply personal, it has never been something I have sought alone—not, how can *I* make *my* world a softer place. I have been asking, I am still asking—how can *we* make *the* world a softer place. In reading this document up to this point, you have been a critical companion in this journey. I hope you know, as we move forward from the spaces opened up on these pages, you are invited (even urged) to keep asking for softness, keep offering softness, and to continue seeking the soft places out (they are there, *I promise*).

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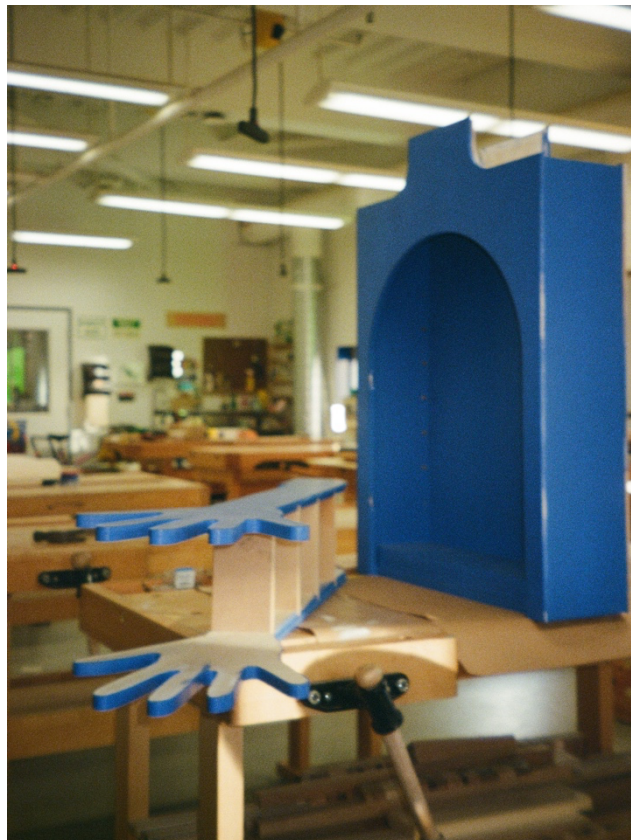
## Appendix A – Process Photos



*Fig. 17, Initial Cardboard Mock-Up, 2024*



*Fig. 16, Chest Cabinet Components, 2025*

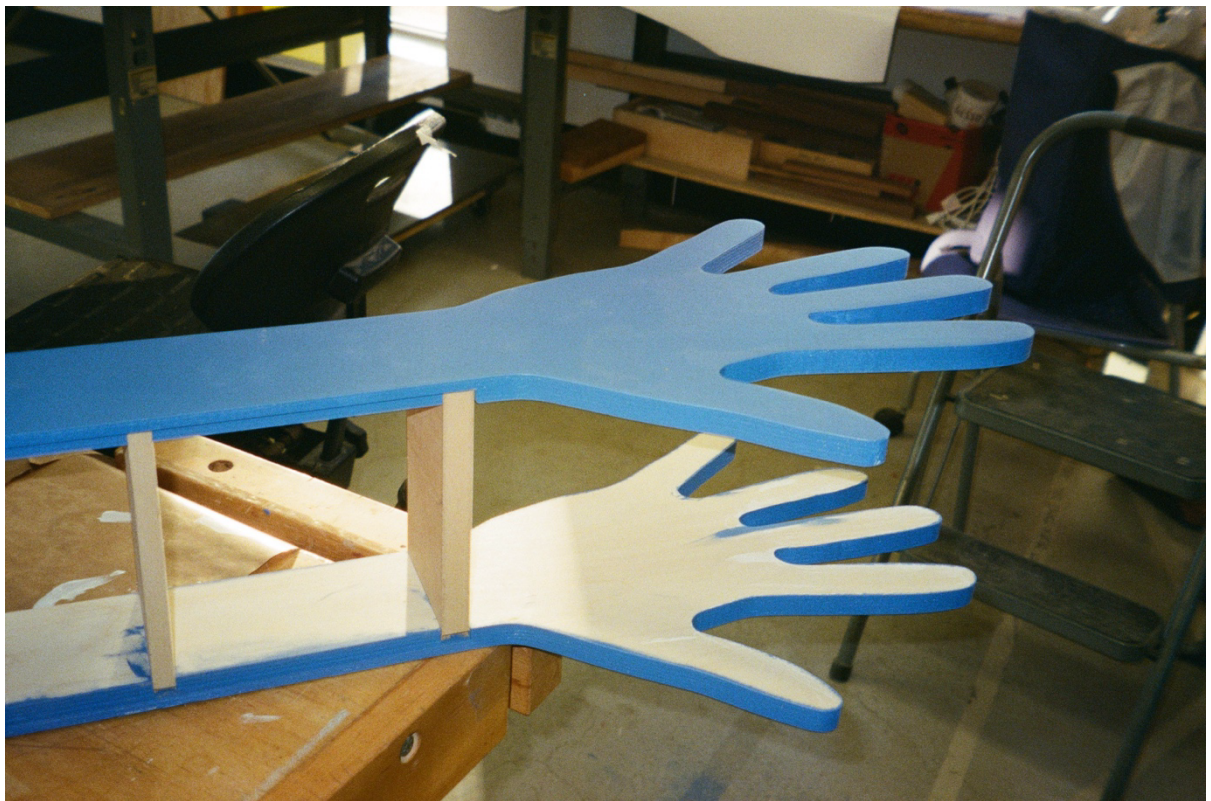


*Fig. 15, Cabinet Construction in Progress*





*Fig. 19, In the Workshop, June 2025*



*Fig. 18, Details of Arm and Hand Construction*





*Fig. 21, Initial Buddy Desk Scale Model (1:8), 2024*



*Fig. 20, Full Scale Mock-Up, 2024*



Fig. 23, Numan Helping to Sort Out Dimensions and Details, 2025

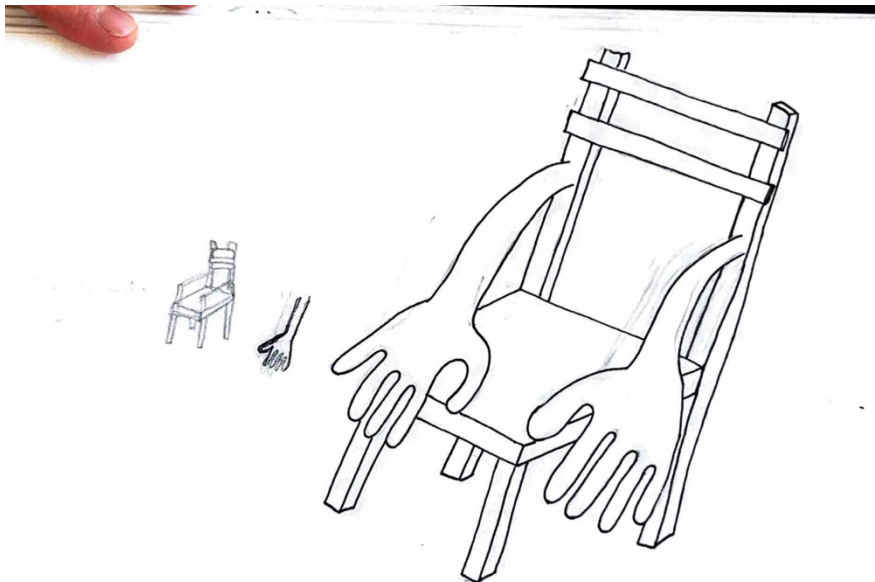


Fig. 22, Original Ideation Drawing of Armchair, 2023





*Fig. 26, Full Scale Mock-Up in Cardboard, 2023*



*Fig. 25, Testing Full Scale Mock-Up*



*Fig. 24, First Iteration of Armchair, January 2025*

