Taking Care: An Exploration of Care Through Art and Intimacy

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TAKING CARE:
AN EXPLORATION OF CARE THROUGH ART AND INTIMACY

By

MEGAN VAN DEUSEN

Under the Direction of Joseph Peragine

ABSTRACT

Care, commonly defined as attentiveness, concern, or interest, manifests itself diversely. From the emotions and exchanges between loved ones to the performance of basic actions like eating and sleeping, care is intrinsic to the human experience. My recent body of conceptual artwork, “Taking Care,” draws on historical traditions of ritual and craftsmanship to explore and elaborate upon the endemic occurrences of caretaking in my life and intimate relationships. “Taking Care” presents evidence, artifacts, and reflections of the needs and instances in my life that have required care, and their corresponding responses, through the use of video, painting, drawing, sculpture, and installation. These artworks seek to question and quantify the meaning and significance of commonplace care rituals, by using both direct documentation of care such as hair remnants or videos of cleaning and traditional art mediums like drawing or sculpture.

INDEX WORDS: care, caretaking, mutuality, intimacy, conceptual art, romanticism, elaboration, ritual, process art, documentation, evidence, love, art
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MEGAN VAN DEUSEN

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TAKING CARE:
AN EXPLORATION OF CARE THROUGH ART AND INTIMACY

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DEDICATION

To my loving and caring partner, December.
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1 INTRODUCTION

Care, generally defined as attentiveness, concern, and interest, manifests itself in a myriad of ways. From the emotions we experience towards loved ones to the need to perform basic self-care actions like eating and sleeping, care plays an essential role in shaping human existence. For example, diligent care by adults is necessary for human children to survive. Cooperative partnerships in the diverse types of interpersonal exchange we experience every day help create emotional meaning and significance in our lives. Additionally, taking care of oneself is intrinsic to both survival and more contemporary issues such as defining what it means to lead a happy or successful life and navigating the steps to achieve that goal. The function of my recent body of artwork titled “Taking Care,” is researching, evaluating, and presenting the many facets of caretaking as they have presented themselves in my personal experience of care between my partner and myself.

The artwork created for “Taking Care” are a response to demands for care and caring in my intimate life. Events such as creating and fostering a loving intimate relationship; caring for my partner, December Jacoby, when her brain disorder made her unable to care for herself; caring for my own mental health issues; and the daily processes and rituals that contribute to our well-being are both the impetus and source for the content and materiality of my work. Seeking to shorten the gap between art and life, the work makes use of literal caretaking actions such as grooming, interpersonal communication, eating, or cleaning. These actions are presented through diverse mediums and methodologies to accurately reflect the omnifarious manifestations of the necessity for care, the need to consider what constitutes proper or improper care, and the emotional significance of care in shaping the human condition.
2 CARE IN CONTEXT

What exactly then does “care” or “caring” mean? Care can refer to either having a concern or interest in a thing or person. It can also refer to specific actions taken to help ensure something’s happiness or survival. According to prominent moral and social philosopher Virginia Held, “there is not yet anything close to agreement among those writing on care on what exactly we should take the meaning of this term to be.”¹ The Oxford English Dictionary defines the noun care as “Mental suffering, sorrow, grief, trouble,” a “Burdened state of mind arising from fear, doubt, or concern about anything” and “Serious or grave mental attention.”² As a verb care becomes “to mourn, lament, grieve, or be troubled.”³ These dictionary definitions highlight the use of “care” as it pertains to having issues that trouble us. Another sense of the word comes from considering practical applications. One functional definition given by Political Scientist Joan C. Tronto in her book Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care is, “everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible,” highlighting the important role of care in our everyday lives.⁴ In order to better understand care as mental suffering, serious attention, and the actions taken to sustain and improve our environments, “Taking Care” researches the presence, context, and methods of care in my own experiences. Care’s significant influence on human biological evolution and social


development are considered, along with how the uniquely human desire and ability to elaborate upon our cares and concerns is directly related to the emergence and importance of art.

2.1 Personal Care

“Taking Care” is a direct response to personal life events. Many artists feel the need to draw from their own lives when creating work. Contemporary artist Shirin Neshat stated, “there have been various issues in my life both personally and otherwise, that have really been important to me, and that have…been strong enough reason to produce a work that responds to that.”5 In my work the emotional, physical, and mental vicissitudes my partner and I have experienced play a major role in determining the content and medium of my work. Difficulties such as our struggles with mental health; the anxiety I experience concerning our relationship, my work, and myself as a person; and the trials to successfully continue to strengthen our mutual nurturing abilities and our emotional bond. The focus on care’s manifestations through my personal and intimate experiences grew naturally from my preexisting practice of creating art as personal therapy and as a direct result of the demands for care between my partner and I.

One of the earliest examples of these artistic responses to my personal life were the experiments that eventually birthed the project X-Years of Success (Fig. 2.1-2.2). After moving to Atlanta I suffered an extended period of social anxiety concerning my interactions with others in my working and social environments. While I was working at school, in classes, or spending time with December, I was frequently disrupted by recurring fears about the potential results or consequences of something I might do or say. Typical of social anxiety disorder, I found myself

“trembling or shaking,” “sweating,” and would become confused and have a shaky voice when speaking.

The idea of externalizing my thoughts and feelings by talking to others, especially in an intimate setting, made me intensely apprehensive. I likened this externalization process to the shedding of hair and fingernails. When these things are attached to us, we groom them, care for them, and often regard them as attractive, but as soon as they are detached they become waste material and generally produce feelings of disgust. The differences between how these biomaterials are considered spoke to my own beliefs about my thoughts and emotions, which feel natural and comfortable when they are still inside of me, but generally produce fear, shame, and disgust once they shared. My response was to begin collecting mine and my partner’s “waste” hair and fingernails created by our regular grooming processes. I also began to make videos of these grooming events, beginning with myself and quickly moving towards mutually clipping each other’s hair or nails. At first I was unsure why I was investing in this process. The bodily artifacts reminded me of the sentimental practice of gifting a loved one a lock of hair, that the practice of grooming each other was reassuring, and that I felt trusted and accepted by her willingness to participate in these somewhat unconventional practices with me. After years of collecting these bodily artifacts and videos I now recognize them as evidence of our ability to foster mutuality in our intimate lives and to continuously strengthen and reaffirm our closeness through the repeated process of mutual grooming.

One of the most demanding challenges December and I face is the care and management of her bipolar disorder, “a brain disorder that causes unusual shifts in mood, energy, activity levels, and the ability to carry out day-to-day tasks.” Although these symptoms may sound


like the types of ups and downs we all experience, for people afflicted by this disorder they can be incredibly severe. It is important to understand that these symptoms can cause a person to lose total control of their feelings and actions. Depending on the severity of symptoms a person can be rendered incapable of functioning in working and social situations and may face damaging consequences such as loss of employment, broken relationships, and suicide.\(^8\) The mood shifts bipolar disorder causes “occur in distinct periods” of emotional extremes and vary greatly both from person to person and over the course of an individual’s life. Periods of melancholy, despair, and other emotional lows are called “depressive episodes” and the converse occurrences of intense excitability are “manic episodes.”\(^9\)

In the summer of 2012 December was afflicted with a severe period of manic symptoms more intense than she had previously experienced. During the episode she exhibited the distinctive manic symptoms of irritability, racing thoughts, aggressive and quick speech, distractibility, insomnia, egocentricism, and engaging in impulsive high-risk behaviors such as spending sprees.\(^10\) Her ability to perceive reality and respond appropriately to regular everyday situations suddenly vanished. Simple events such as finding a lost object or reading an email would result in unpredictable and vehement emotional responses from crying to laughing to yelling. Naturally, the effects of her manic episode were traumatic for both of us. Attempting to care for her, I assumed many domestic responsibilities and attempted to provide her emotional support in the face of her forcefully erratic and sometimes hurtful words and actions.

As author Edward H. Taylor notes in the introduction to his book, *Atlas of Bipolar Disorders*, “the idea that mental disorders can take away a person’s free will continues to be difficult

\(^8\) Ibid.

\(^9\) Ibid.

\(^10\) Ibid.
for people to accept intellectually and emotionally."\textsuperscript{11} True to his statement, a significant portion of our emotional distress arose from witnessing, understand, and treating this loss of will. The artistic response to these events focused on that trauma. Drawing from some of December’s behaviors during the worst parts of her episode I created the video piece \textit{Chains} (Fig. 2.3). The video centers on December from the chest up, sitting in a chair as I slowly pile metal chains over her shoulders. In between each coil December brushes her hair. As the chains stack higher and higher her ability to perform the basic task of grooming becomes increasingly challenging, reflecting the challenges she faced under the weight of her brain disorder.

The lingering weight of these hardships also inspired the mixed media panel pieces \textit{Chains (Link 1)} (Fig. 2.4), \textit{Chains (Link 2)} (Fig. 2.5), and \textit{Chains (Link 3)} (Fig. 2.6). Each piece addresses different long-term complications in treating her bipolar and the continued efforts of to heal our related emotional traumas. \textit{Chains (Link 1)} discusses the pain of watching my partner disappear through the use additive and subtractive processes and materials. The paint, ink, and charcoal both distort and reconstruct her appearance, representing the psychological damage caused by this episode and our efforts to reconstruct through memory the capable and supporting partner she usually is. Additionally, the multi-modal approach of healing myself through different mediums helps me to access care while stressing the importance of addressing mental health.

As I process these and other traumas through my work the distance between my life and my art shortens. Like many of the pieces included in Sophie Calle’s series “Autobiographies,” such as \textit{The Other} (Fig. 2.7) and \textit{The Pig} (Fig. 2.8), these projects are a “reaction to something” and an attempt to offset my problems so that I might “not just be a victim.”\textsuperscript{12} Artist Felix Gonzalez-


lez-Torres also exemplifies artistic response to personal suffering. Art works such as *Untitled (9 Days of Bloodwork – Steady Decline and False Hope)* (Fig 2.9) and the publicly displayed billboard piece *Untitled* (Fig. 2.10) respond to the difficulty of loosing his partner to AIDS, examining the pain of personal loss and bringing attention to the AIDS epidemic.

Asking myself “what can I do to not suffer,” my studio practices have increasingly featured literal self-care. Untitled (Fig. 2.11) is exemplary of the effort to create healthier self-care rituals and diminish my own afflictions through art. This project, which responds to the chronic symptoms of fatigue and depression resulting from my anxiety, consists of collecting video documentation of myself napping in my studio. The videos are displayed together in a digital projection that is continuously expanded as more naps collect over time. The action of isolating myself in a work environment via sleeping functions to highlight the feeling of depression as “helplessness of existence, be it expressed through sadness, asthenia (fatigue), inhibition, or the inability to initiate action.” Ultimately, *Naps Project* simultaneously addresses both issues that require care and the attempts made to mitigate those problems.

Philosopher Stan van Hooft writes that humans need to “take care of someone…to see to that person’s needs and to provide comfort and assistance in light of those needs.” By artistically working through the life issues of caring for my anxiety and my partner’s brain disorder the evaluation of care logically proffers itself as the conceptual core of my work. In “Taking Care,” artistic projects are direct reflections of care’s abundant presence. This prominence also necessitates investigation of care’s role in human nature.

13. Ibid.


2.2 Evolving Care

Unsurprisingly, the desire and ability to care plays a critical role of care in human biological and sociological evolution. In her book, *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began*, independent scholar Ellen Dissanayake thoroughly investigates how care became intrinsic to our survival, our happiness, and our ability share our loves or concerns with others. She notes how beneficial evolutionary traits, such as bipedalism, necessitated changes in the birth and care of infants. Walking upright cased changes in women’s pelvic size and structure. Due to the decrease in birth canal size infants born in “an increasingly immature state so that at birth their bodies would more safely and comfortably pass through the birth canal.”¹⁶ Naturally “the adaptive anatomical and physiological changes that made these earlier births possible would have been accompanied by behavioral adaptation. Because human infants were helpless for a far longer time after birth…they required prolonged attention and care. Mothers and infants who found ways to develop and sustain intense affective bonds would have been at and advantage over mothers and infants who did not.”¹⁷

Human evolution necessitated that we create biological, behavioral, and psychological adaptations that remain with humans to this day. Babies who learned how to how to elicit caring response in their elders would also have an increased chance of passing on their genes, making the trait of caring about others something that would become hardwired into human functionality over time. Dissanayanke states that “emotional communion – not simply ‘affiliation’ or ‘sociability’ – has become so crucial to the human project that infants are born with specialized brain pathways for seeking out and responding to…these emphasized and elaborated rhythmic


¹⁷. Ibid.
and modal signals from other humans,” specifically referring to what is commonly called baby talk. According to her studies the strikingly universal use of these types of parent and child interaction have imbedded themselves into our neuropsychology. The chemical functions of our brains have a built-in reward system of good feelings to dispense when we engage in mutualistic social activities, such as “receiving and giving praise, recognition, encouragement, comfort, smiles, and touch.” Ultimately the fact that these types of behaviors affect our “neurophysiological, endocrinological, and immunological systems and are required for adult physical and emotional health” demonstrates that the human brain was built to need and provide care.

2.3 Care, Ritual, and Art

Care has solidified its importance in human existence through evolution, making investigations of its nature and practice necessary. In her book, The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global, Virginia Held discusses the importance of evaluating care stating:

We need…not only to examine the practices and discern with new sensitivities the values already embedded or missing within them but also to construct the appropriate normative theory with which to evaluate them, reform them, and shape them anew. This, I think, involves understanding care as a value worthy of the kind theoretical elaboration justice has received. Understanding the value of involves understanding how it should not be limited to the household or family; care should be recognized as a political and social value also.

18. Ibid, 16.
19. Ibid, 42.
20. Ibid, 42.
The prominent questions become how does humanity perform these evaluations? How do we establish value and meaning for care as a culture?

As previously discussed, the specific rhythms and tones used by parents and infants to communicate and establish necessary bonds are established in human’s neuropathways. Furthermore, these “rhythms and modes characterize not only the intimate play of mothers and infants but also ritual ceremonies.”

The use of repetition, tone, and elaboration seen in baby talk came to be used to create affirming practices that function to restore unity on a larger social scale. Dissanayanke concludes that, “the arts evolved...as physical correlates of psychological concern. The inborn rhythmic-modal sensitivities of mutuality, through cultural elaborations, became adaptive means for arousing interest, riveting joint attention, synchronizing bodily rhythms and activities, conveying messages with conviction and memorability, and ultimately indoctrinating and reinforcing right attitudes and behavior.”

Naturally occurring routines “have a tangible context in the particular life-world of the recipients – that is, clear connections to their vital interests, the important things relevant to satisfaction and survival in their environment. They pertain to or are about the things that people care about and consequently address universal human needs for belonging, meaning, and competence.” In other words, expounding upon accessible practices through repetition, decoration, and other forms of evoking attention, are tools for relieving anxiety. These elaborations upon routine are fundamentally what we think of as rituals and the foundations of artistic practice. They help create interpersonal bonds, communicate interest, and establish meaning and significance within one’s social group.

There are copious examples of ritual present in the contemporary art world. Serbian performance artist Marina Abramović’s work is a paradigmatic example. Many of her works

22. Dissanayanke, Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began, 130.

23. Ibid, 139.

make heavy, deliberate use of ritual through her use of specific types of actions and their repetition. For example, the 1975 performance *Thomas Lips* (Fig. 2.12) uses iconic religious and ceremonial gestures like drinking wine and whipping herself.25 Another example is the mixed media installation piece *Balkan Baroque* (Fig. 2.13). For the performance aspect of this work Abramović sits in the middle of the space for four days in six-hour time periods cleaning one thousand five hundred beef bones whilst continuously singing childhood folk songs.26 The repetition of the cleaning actions and the use of these childhood songs mirrors the rhythmic use of specific tones and motions in traditional rituals. Abramović states about another work, *Dream House* (Fig 2.14), an interactive project in which visitors stay at a house where they must perform specific activities such as recording their dreams, that her work is a “continuing attempt to create a cultural dialog about and to reconnect with our need to ritualize the simple actions of everyday life.”27 In this way, Abramović’s work is a call for us to remember ritual’s power to help us lead meaningful lives.

Like Abramović, my artistic practices are aligned with the tradition of using ritual and craftsmanship to mitigate concerns, create feelings of mutuality, and reinforce the aspects of life that are spiritually, physically, and emotionally significant. As can be seen in the previously discussed works, repeated actions are taken to relieve stress since, “doing something in a stressful circumstance is adaptive.”28 By ritualizing simple actions such as the trimming of hair and fingernails featured in *X Years of Success* (Fig. 2.1-2.2) or the act of sleeping as seen in *Naps Project* (Fig. 2.11) the works are meant to both relieve my own stress through familiar activity, but also to reignite observance of the role of care in all of our lives.


For many years my artwork has dealt largely with process. In drawing, painting, and sculpting I sought to create work with a clear visual history of its making by leaving evidence of a work’s materials or the methods used to make it. Under-painting and canvas or linen would be left showing in order to display the nature of a piece’s materials and history. Holes would be sanded or cut clean through fabric and paper as a clear visual demonstration of literal destruction as can be seen my 2009 large scale, mixed media work, *Re-Presentation* (Fig. 3.1). These procedures were intended to discuss the concepts of creation and representation of the self in my earlier body of work, “Fabric Veils,” created from 2008 to 2010.

“Process,” defined as a series of actions or systems, is a highly accurate description for how I view life: a sequence of operations we all perform with the hopes of achieving some effect or result. Knowing the personal importance of process I wanted my work to make use of it in a more direct way. This desire led me to experiment with how displaying an actual action, primarily with documentation such as video or photography, could convey content. These experiments, such as the video piece *Separates the Hair from the Fingernails* (Fig. 3.2), were quickly rewarding. Changing my method of creating work from primarily iconic and symbolic means such as painting and drawing to an indexical approach of presenting evidence or documentation helped close the disparate gaps between my life, my art, and the responses my work elicited.

Removing the elements of artistic craftsmanship and use of visual metaphors in favor of more direct use of my own life and personal rituals as art creates feeling of familiarity for viewers. The care actions and their evidence used throughout “Taking Care” are generally commonplace and recognizable, increasing their ability to be read as an honest and emotional reflection of actual mutuality. In addition, by working with a combination of action or process and the creation physical, more conventional art works emphasizes the diversity and complexity of
care’s manifestations. The combination of methods, materials, and content presented in this body of work ultimately functions to draw on the practice of using ritual and craftsmanship to reduce emotional suffering and establish an assuring sense of meaning and significance in life both for individuals and for their larger social or cultural group.

3.1 Life as Art

Curator Nato Thompson wrote in Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011 that “the desire to merge art and life resonates throughout the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century and then multiplies across the globe at the beginning of the twenty-first.” Evidence of this blurring can be seen in the work of artists like Allan Kaprow, who wrote in a 1966 essay “that audiences should be eliminated entirely.” These sentiments are echoed in the feminist art movement where artists felt that “personal revelation, through art, could be a political tool.” The prevalence of this merging is also seen in the multitude of socially-engaged art projects like activist organization Women on Waves (Fig 3.3) that sails between the coasts of countries where abortion is illegal “in a boat designed by Atelier Van Leishout that housed a functioning abortion clinic.” For the writers Claire Bishop and Nicholas Bourriaud the drive to merge art life are reactions to the persistent cultural alienation caused by capitalism’s “com-


modification of human relations,” which has permeated all aspects of human interactions. In echoing the immaterial nature of social interactions in art, artists can create antimarket works that help to rehumanize themselves and others, mitigating the alienating nature of capitalism. Thusly we can see how integrating life and art fosters an emphasis on the mutuality we all need and require.

The solid propinquity between the nature of life and the art works produced for “Taking Care” is in many ways the keystone of the project. It dictates the content, method, and material nature for discrete pieces and the body of work as a whole. The importance of care and mutuality on humanity’s evolution dictates “that we evolved to do things with other people, for everyone’s mutual interest and benefit.” This body of work is intentionally aligned with the historical use of life-focused ritual and craftsmanship to satisfy the psychobiological needs challenged by today’s culture of consumerism. My work uses action and repetition to emphasize the intangible and temporal nature of care and its inherence in life.

The desire to use literal care actions that are inextricable from my daily life and lack physical substance as my art presents a particular challenge. These works endeavors to “use artistic media within artistic spaces to refer to life itself, to a pure activity, to pure practice.” One of those methods is by collecting indexical evidence, or documentation of care’s manifestation in my life. In his essay, *Art in the Age of Biopolitics*, critic and theorist Boris Groys describes the difference between “artworks” such as paintings and sculptures, and “art documentation.” For him the main defining difference is that art documentation refers to art, as opposed


to being art itself. He elaborates to say that those working with art documentation work with life as art and create work that in fact has no end product. As such art documentation is “primarily narrative, and thus it evokes the unrepeatability of living time…Art documentation is thus the art of making living things out of artificial ones, a living activity out of a technical practice: it is a bio art that is simultaneously biopolitics.” 37 He declares that documentation presents things that cannot be presented, and that it does so in a way that regular artwork cannot.

Examples of works that make use of art documentation such as X-Years of Success (Fig 2.1) have already been discussed. Another strong example is the ongoing project Care Artifacts (Fig. 3.4), which was created in response to my social anxiety. In order to alleviate that anxiety the project requires for me to first participate in and recognize caretaking occurrences between others and myself and then collect some type of documentation of those events. Although Care Artifacts’ physical presentation is a collection of objects that are the direct result of care actions, displaying these numerous records of care, love, and concern between others and myself refers to the immaterial actions that created them. By sharing this documentation in an art context the collections of gifts, personal letters, and photographs (Fig 3.5) that make up just some of the items included in this project I can share the mutualistic care present in my life and relationships with others. Additionally, because Care Artifacts consists largely of me literally engaging in care practices the piece ultimately functions as personal care, doubling its emphasis on the importance of care.

Marina Abramović stated that “The idea of a performance having a beginning and end was very difficult for me...For me it was and is very important that the public never sees the beginning and the end. It’s very important that this image continues. It’s almost like our planet endlessly moving around the sun. And we’re endlessly moving around the galaxy. The entire

37. Groys, “Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation.”
universe is looping, and I like to simulate this looping in performance. This statement resonates with my use of multi-year ongoing projects, which may potentially have no end, such as Care Artifacts (Fig 3.4) and X-Years of Success (Fig 2.1). The looping videos of the regularly repeated rituals of hair cutting and fingernail clipping emphasize the recapitulatory and continuous nature of care’s presence in life. In Care Artifacts, the objects have clearly accumulated over an extensive amount of time, reflecting our own accumulation of memories over time. The method of selectively altering presentation of artifacts also speaks to memory’s habit of only showing us pieces and parts of our collective experiences and highlights the unrepeatability of specific events. Many of the objects themselves are deteriorating or garbage, such as fading receipts and dirty tissues. The work’s materials also include photos, tags, or written description of non-corporeal actions or objects that no longer exist helping to reinforce the connection life itself as a process, not an end product.

3.2 Tangible vs Intangible

Another method “Taking Care” uses to maintain concordance with the disposition of both care and life is a clear amalgamation of material and immaterial expressions of care. These works make deliberate use of materials and methods that either place emphasis on the physical or the asomatical in order to speak to care’s pronounced diversity. Object-oriented works such as paintings, drawings, and sculptures are created to speak towards experiences that have felt particularly weighty and tactile, and time-oriented or incorporeal works are created to emphasize the nature of life as a passing series of unique instances, the accumulation of instances over time, and an ephemeral process that can have lasting physical effects. Frequently works will

38. Abramovic, Marina Abramovic, 14.
make use of a combination of these elements, because ultimately care has been a consistent and simultaneous mixture of tangible and intangible feeling in my life. This simultaneous expression makes it natural and necessary for my artistic practice to be a combination of actions, evidence, and more traditional “static” methods like painting or drawing.

Many artists have expressed the need and desire to use multiple mediums. Shirin Neshat said that “…it’s not been the medium that has ruled my work, but it’s the subject…whatever medium seems to suit me best to be able to convey my idea, I seem to reach for that medium.”

The husband and wife conceptual artist team Nicholas and Sheila Pye have also commented on the need for a multimodal methodology:

SP: The themes are always the same. But sometimes when we’re making the film we’ll get ideas for the photos that won’t necessarily be in the film. So we’re extending on the film. We’re also interested in articulating the same ideas through a different medium.

NP: They’re their own entity but it’s the same body of work. The photographs can stand independently and function independently. We show the films in film festivals as well, and they function in that context. So the shoots make a larger body of art and incorporate all these different mediums, and we’re able to exhibit them in different formations, in different structures, at different times.

Their work, as can be seen in the 2005 print *Stasis* (Fig 3.6), also deal with the nature of relationships and the difficulties people endure in maintaining a balance between the self and the couple. Sheila also comments that she “studied as a painter, and then as a video artist, so what I create inevitably incorporates certain elements specific to those mediums. I think the boundaries of these mediums should dissolve.”

Like her, I feel that my background in drawing in painting remains present in other mediums, and plays a role in the need to create physical works in conjunction with other methods. For the Pyes and myself, working across mediums is


41. Ibid, 44.
an important way to fully explore our ideas and multiply the amount of channels through which our work can be received.

The previously discussed two-dimensional works *Chains (Link 1)* (Fig 2.3), *Chains, (Link 2)* (Fig 2.4), and *Chains (Link 3)* (Fig 2.5), exemplify the need and function for these static works. As mentioned the need to create these physical works arose from the tactile repercussions of my partner’s manic episode and used drawing and painting mediums and processes to present those issues. Another similar example is the 2013 large format drawing, *An Enduring Pattern of Inner Experience and Behavior that Deviates Markedly from the Expectations of the Individual’s Culture* (Fig 3.7). Like all the works in “Taking Care,” this drawing was created in response to personal experience. I began this piece largely in response to recognizing the need to attend to my own mental health issues. These efforts primarily consisted of cognitive behavioral therapy and researching a multitude of mental health symptoms and disorders that I felt would help me better understand my own issues and their healing process. The piece consists only of the text indicated in the title drawn across the top of a large white sheet of heavy rag paper, transcribed in the same font and format from its printed source where it is a listed indicator of personality disorders.42

I found myself drawn to this phrase and its meaning. I have long identified as a person with habits, behaviors, and perceptions that deviate from my peer group. Even as a child I demonstrated cultural deviance through issues like gender non-conformity and an inability to properly engaged with other children for play or school projects. In contemplating this symptom in research and therapy I gained some understanding in these issues of difference, along with the corresponding corrective efforts administered from my peers, my teachers, and my parents, contributed to my social anxiety. Seeking to reflect this progressive construction the text is rendered is varying degrees of completion with different drawing materials, leaving some words as

barely visible pencil outlines and building others in multiple layers of inks. *An Enduring Pattern of Inner Experience and Behavior that Deviates Markedly from the Expectations of the Individual’s Culture* (Fig 3.7) also demonstrates a deviation from traditions of drawing. Leaving areas that appear unfinished, making use of text as opposed to imagery, and creating a drawing whose picture plane is mostly blank space devoid of any artistic manipulation causes this piece to disrupt the expectations of drawing. Instead, it uses drawing materials and process to address the specific cares and concerns I have concerning my mental health, serving as a strong example of the need for those mediums in my work.

*Bed* (Fig 3.8) demonstrates the concurrent use of tangible and intangible elements through the combination of recorded sound and physical materials to create a sculpture. The work consists of two white nightstands placed on either side of large piece of white fabric that hangs from the top of a wall and drapes down onto the floor several feet in front, ending in a large knot. Atop one of the nightstands is a digital clock that displays the actual time of day. From inside the nightstands come the sounds of a male and a female voice, echoing and reverberating in such a way that each of the voices sound as if they are constantly moving into different types of spaces. Each of the voices asks a series of intimate questions such as “Do you love me?” “How do you want me to touch you?” or “How could you do that to me?”

Just as I would in creating a painting, *Bed* was conceptualized from the beginning with a specific visual arrangement of symbolic components. For example, the fabric is sewn to resemble a sheet at the top, with a line of red ribbon trim to visually break the immense amount of white in the piece, and to work with the red display on the clock. The fabric is long, hung high on the wall, and extended out onto the floor to give the piece an overbearing and monumental feeling. The two nightstands vary in size and quality, referencing dissimilarities between partners. One of the nightstands appears new and undamaged while the other is visibly haggard. They stand for how an individual may view their partner, particularly a new one, versus themselves. Just like in a painting, those components amass into an artwork whose meaning is dis-
cerned through its visual and physical attributes. Combined with the time-oriented immateriality of the questioning voices *Bed* speaks to the simultaneity of physical, durational, and emotional processes involved in building an intimate relationship. Additionally, the sound component forces a pervasive sense of anxiety through its content and disorienting audio quality. Ultimately the piece speaks to practically tangible emotional difficulties that continuously arise in intimate negotiations.

3.3 Suffering, Empathy, and the Assignment of Value

In their essay, “Art is for Empathy,” collaborative artist team Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby romantically venerate the appearance of personal suffering and private obstacles in art work, writing:

> Art is for empathy, and empathy is for the reduction of suffering. That’s the way we’ve always justified being artists. Otherwise, what’s art for? What does it do for humanity? On the one hand, I feel that the artist has a responsibility to reduce suffering in an abstract, global sense which encompasses all the citizens of Earth, most of whom, obviously, will never see the artist’s work. This responsibility can only fulfilled through a kind of ripple effect: we worry, we make work that reflects that worry, the work flows outward and some humanizing impact is felt.⁴³

As fancifully utopian as their statement may seem, its sentiments are tightly ingrained in my work. The works discussed here are a collection of elaborations, investigations, and responses to care in my private life. By authentically sharing my experiences of love, mutuality, attention, assistance, healing, concern, and anguish, through the use of familiar objects and processes, the complex and multifarious manner of care is revealed. This combination of accessibility and

adherence to the romantic notions of “integrity, sincerity…[and] dedication,” is intended to elicit some degree of emotional, if not empathetic, reaction.\textsuperscript{44} Compassionate response is an important component of my work because of my efforts to follow the previously examined elaborative practices of creating objects and rituals to encourage healing and mutuality. In researching care these works are meant to not just address my own concerns, but to address care’s meaning and significance within the human experience, ultimately producing a psychological benefit for others.

The use of suffering and empathy is widely evidenced in art. Revisiting Marina Abramović’s oeuvre supplies a vast accumulation of these elements. For example, the performance piece \textit{Art Must be Beautiful, Artist Must be Beautiful} (Fig. 3.9) consists of the recognizable and common action of hair brushing. For the performance Abramović brushes and combs her hair with increasing intensity to the point of self-harm.\textsuperscript{45} Abramović has noted the importance of suffering and its relationship to ritual saying, “every ceremony, every ritual from ancient times until now, including the Catholic Church…stage rituals that include pain…When you stage the pain we are talking about how to actually understand how the mind and body work and what pain exactly is.”\textsuperscript{46} The works of Paul McCarthy are also full antagonizing suffering which produce an empathetic response. His 1974 performance \textit{Hot Dog} (Fig. 3.10), in which the artist strips, shaves his body, crams his penis into a hot dog bun, stuffs his mouth with hot dog buns, and covers his overly full face with gauze. One artist who witnessed the performance said, “It is apparent that he is about to vomit…Should he vomit he might choke to death, since the vomit would have no place to go. And should any one of us vomit, we might trigger


\textsuperscript{45} Abramovic, \textit{Marina Abramovic}, 17.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid, 22.
him to do likewise.” Another example are the controversial works of Spanish artist Santiago Sierra. Works such as 10 People Paid to Masturbate (Fig. 3.11) and 10 Inch Line Shaved on the Heads of Two Junkies Who Received a Shot of Heroin as Payment (Fig 3.12), which consist of exactly what their titles imply, work to confront the wealthy world of the art market with the dehumanizing effects of capitalism by directly exhibiting and act of exploitation. Viewers witnessing this suffering are most likely going to have an empathetic response, serving to deconstruct the commodification of humanity.

These examples are all antagonist presentations of suffering. They make use of “the classic avant-garde recipe of shock, disruption, and ambiguity.” In disconcerting viewers, they force the consideration of human hardship and create an emotive response. Claire Bishop wrote that “a democratic society is one in which relations of conflict are sustained, not erased.” Because an operational society is one where problems are included, evaluated, and contested it has been important for my work to not only include the loving and healing aspects of care but also the burdensome and painful elements of concern and worry.

A poignant example of the presentation of disquietude is the piece, Anxiety Project (Fig. 3.13). Like the other works included in “Taking Care,” this project was created to document the laborious processes of discovering and addressing the severity of my own anxiety. In the fall of 2013, after extensive discussion with my therapist and my partner, I realized that I experience uncontrollable anxiety in a wide variety of areas in my life, that it has affected me for my entire adult life, and that it has consistently interfered with my ability to lead a happy life. The symptoms of anxiety disorders, such as Generalized Anxiety Disorder, are characteristically im-


proper, pervasive, and disproportionate feelings of fear and worry that presents itself in a variety of areas. This constant apprehension can hinder one’s ability to resolve problems and make decisions or result in panic attacks.\textsuperscript{50}

Anxiety Project is intended to present the many manifestations of problematic care in my life. Because the pathology of anxiety includes caring too much, often about the wrong issues, and the irrational actions taken to mitigate these disproportionate fears, this project shares items that reflect both my worries and the processes I have used to deal with these worries. Many of the included artifacts are the multitudes of lists and notes contained in notebooks, scrap papers, and sticky notes (Fig 3.14); tools I have used for years to keep myself from forgetting. Like in Care Artifacts (Fig 3.4), I use easily recognizable objects such as prescription bottles, appointment cards, and a red emergency phone. These items remind viewers of their own struggles with fear and care. In particular, there are lists describing my own symptoms. These lists clearly portray both the scope and severity of my anxiety by offering access to my internal dialog as it avails me to wake up panicked about missed calls or emails or obsessing over how much I should help others.

The art works in “Taking Care” share my internal discomfort and efforts for improvement. These projects help alleviate my own concerns and often provide literal help for others and myself. Although the care actions involved in these works only happen within the limited field of my intimate friends and family, I find that sharing these personal emotions is important because “we can value the explicitly emotional in art as highly as we value the ambiguously clever. And, as ludicrous as it may seem, we can advocate for narcissism as a viable road to empathy in art...The element that joins narcissism and empathy is love, and love is good.”\textsuperscript{51} For viewers, the earnest and open sharing of intimate actions make “Taking Care” an emotive discussion of

\textsuperscript{50} Vladan Starcevic, Anxiety Disorders in Adults: A Clinical Guide (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 105.

\textsuperscript{51} Vey Duke and Battersby, “Art is for Empathy,” 47.
the nature of social interactions, the taboos surrounding mental health problems, and how people continuously work together to create a mutually desired and understood way of life. In this way my work aligns with the purpose of the arts as describe by Dissanayanke in the following quotation: “The arts are the field on which we place our own dreams, thoughts, and desires alongside those of others, so that solitudes can meet...When you boil it all down, that is the social purpose of art: the creation of mutuality, the passage from feeling into shared meaning.”52

4 CONCLUSIONS

The work presented in “Taking Care” establishes care’s ubiquitous presence not just in my own experiences, but also in the human condition. The close connection between caring, the creation of elaborations and ritual, and creation of emotional meaning and significance is a key relationship in this body of work. This correlation allows the work to function as intellectual research and psychological relief. It evaluates and ascertains the importance of understanding, giving, and receiving care to human existence through diverse methodologies and materials including painting, video, sculpture, and social engagement. Additionally, by using literal caretaking actions such as grooming, interpersonal communication, or cleaning as both source material and art itself these projects stay closely aligned to actual life practices. Using examples of care from my experiences “Taking Care" becomes an intensive study of the processes taken to encourage the analysis and attribution of value to care for myself and the larger cultures in which I and my work exist.

Projects make use of actual caretaking actions and artistic elaborations, creating a multimodal reflection of care. Where action is the art, art documentation is used to refer to these in-

52. Dissanayanke, Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began, 204.
tangible actions. These collections of care evidence offer relief of anxiety as a mementos and artifact. Additionally, these projects are meant to evoke emotional empathetic response in people who interact with the work. The deeply personal and commonplace nature of many of my materials such as hair, personal letters, to do lists, and journal entries, in combination with the simultaneously clinical and sentimental presentation of these artifacts, encourage the understanding that these items are important, related to everyday human experience, and intimate reflections of the person who created them.
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APPENDIX

Figure 2.1  X Years of Success (Hair), 2011 – Present, Human hair, stainless steel platters, shelves, boxes, bag, Dimensions variable, Installation view, Earnest G. Welch Gallery, 2014
Figure 2.2  X Years of Success (Hair), 2011 – Present, Human hair, stainless steel platters, shelves, boxes, bag, Dimensions variable, Installation view, Earnest G. Welch Gallery, 2014
Figure 2.3  
*Chains*, 2012, Digital Video for Projection, 2m 13s
Figure 2.4  *Chains (Link 1)*, 2013, Mixed media on panel, 20 x 24 in
Figure 2.5  *Chains (Link 2)*, 2013, Mixed media on panel, 20 x 24 in
Figure 2.6  *Chains (Link 3)*, 2013, Mixed media on panel, 20 x 24 in
The Other

There was a man I liked, but the first time we made love I was afraid to look at him. I thought I was still in love with Greg, and feared being overwhelmed by the idea that the man in my bed wasn’t the right one. So, I chose to close my eyes. In the dark, at least the uncertainty remained. One day I made the mistake of telling him why I kept my eyes closed in bed. He said nothing. Several months later, finally free of the ghost of Greg, and my doubts, I opened my eyes, now certain that he was the one I wanted to see. I didn’t know that it would be our last night together. He was about to leave me.

“What happens is always so far ahead of us, that we can never catch up with it and know its true appearance.”

Figure 2.7   Sophie Calle, *The Other*, 1992, One framed text, 50 x 50 cm, One framed black and white photograph, 170 x 100 cm
Figure 2.7 Sophie Calle, *The Pig*, 2001, One framed text, 50 x 50 cm, One framed black and white photograph, 170 x 100 cm

The Pig

It’s a silly story. I was about thirty. A man phoned to say that he and I were making similar work and that we should meet. I always worry I might miss out on something so I agreed. When he arrived he told me his art consisted of stopping women in the street and asking them to sleep with him. Well, he said, wasn’t one of my projects all about getting strangers to spend time in my bed? He told me he was taking me to a barbecue. I spent the whole evening playing the maid, grilling sausages, serving and cleaning up. Time goes by faster when you’re busy. Later he dropped me off outside my door. He leaned in to me and sought my lips. I pushed him away. “What makes you think I’d want to kiss you?” I protested. “Well anyway,” he answered, “you eat like a pig.” Even today, after all these years, his words haunt me. I can’t remember a thing about him, yet he’s still sitting at my table.
Figure 2.9  Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Untitled” (9 Days of Bloodwork – Steady Decline and False Hope), 1993, Gouache and graphite on paper, framed, Overall dimensions vary with installation, Photo: Cal Kowal
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Figure 3.12 Santiago Sierra, *10 Inch Line Shaved on the Heads of Two Junkies Who Received a Shot of Heroin as Payment*, 2000, San Juan, Puerto Rico
Figure 3.13  *Anxiety Project*, 2013-Present, Installation, Dimensions variable, Installation view, Earnest G. Welch Gallery, 2014
Figure 3.14  *Anxiety Project* (Detail), 2013-Present, Installation, Dimensions variable, Installation view, Earnest G. Welch Gallery, 2014