

Interview: Ahead of their debut solo institutional exhibition at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, CAROLYN LAZARD speaks to EDNA BONHOMME about avant-garde film traditions, the aesthetics of access requirements, and finding community with Black disabled artists

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EDNA BONHOMME Using your experience of chronic illness to examine the body, intimacy and labour, your work cuts across many genres – including performance, video, photography and sound – which speaks to your desire to make things accessible. I want to ask you about your artistic journey, and the ways in which you have used various media to engage with the body and the history of medicine.

CAROLYN LAZARD Film was my first love and, having trained as a filmmaker, I became invested in histories of avant-garde cinema as a student at Bard College in the 2000s. Chronic illness led me to explore other media as I became increasingly interested in how artistic production was related to capacity and ability. Throughout art history, the body has been endlessly imaged and reproduced, yet the way bodies are produced and socially reproduced through institutions such as medicine has been largely ignored. For me, “the body” or bodies could also be articulated or explored through how they interface with economic, carceral and diagnostic systems.

EB What I appreciate is the intentionality that you have about citational practices, which are important with respect to thinking about texts and theories that give us joy.

CL You can see citational practices academically or in terms of how Black and disabled people live and work together. If I had to outline a Black krip ethic or methodology, a lot of it has to do with entanglement and being mutually bound and indebted to each other in practices of care.

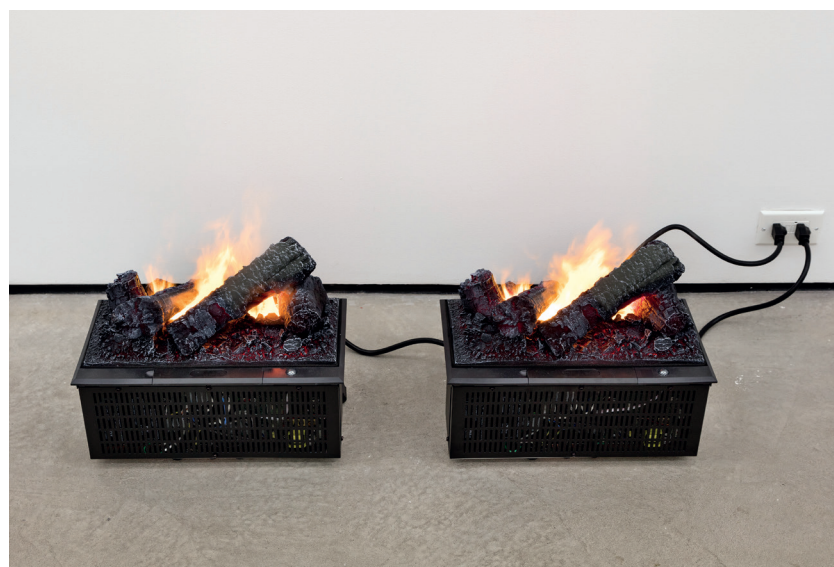
It sometimes feels strange, as an artist, to be put forward and individuated in a certain way. Although that individuation is the one way you can survive, make money and pay rent, it’s not the truth. The truth is that my work comes out of a long lineage of Black, disabled and queer people making art. Ideas and ways of working are constantly being tossed back and forth between me and my friends. My practice doesn’t exist in a vacuum: it is made in relation to the work of other artists who have come before me, and those whose work I learn about day to day.

EB Your practice thinks about the relationship between chronic illness and capitalism. In your 2017 essay ‘How to Be a Person in the Age of Autoimmunity’, you write: ‘Here I was in the hospital, having my body completely compartmentalised – treated not as a living organism but as an alienated collection of symptoms.’



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CL While disability has been framed differently in different places during different epochs, I can really only speak to the current moment. As the pandemic has made clear, it’s not just that disabled and chronically ill people are stigmatized and segregated from society as a whole, it’s that the eugenic impulse is so essentially fused with global racial capitalism and the current conditions of existence that people don’t bat an eye at the thought we should not exist, period. The general consensus is that our lives are worth sacrificing for the economy or an art opening or whatever.

EB In the 2020 essay collection *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century*, editor Alice Wong writes: ‘Staying alive is a lot of work for a disabled person in an ableist society.’ Wong goes on to explain what that looks like in practice. By extension, staying alive is also a lot of work for a Black person in a racist society – and even more so for a disabled Black person.

CL Yes, and to even think of disability and Blackness as separate is impossible: they are intimately related. Subjecthood or humanity has historically been, and continues to be, defined against them. There is, though, a glorious ingenuity to how Black and disabled people navigate systems that are inhospitable. New forms are produced. It's an aesthetic process and practice. Art is an interesting space to think through, reproduce, experiment and practice krip embodiment. It's constantly being reinvented.

EB Collaboration has been a central feature of your work. Alongside your studio practice, you were a co-founder, with Jesse Cohen and Bonnie Swencionis, of Canaries: a network of women and gender non-conforming people living and working with autoimmune conditions and other chronic illnesses. It is important to have a collective that is centred around such an issue, not just within art institutions, but in the US more broadly, where almost 30 million people have no healthcare. In the context of such challenging biomedical regimes, how do you address, on a basic material level, that inequity of producing art, when someone might not be insured or not paid a living wage to be able to survive within artistic spaces? Is that collaborative work still something that you engage in?

CL Canaries is still ongoing as a private listserv, but it no longer functions as a public-facing art collective. We made art together for a few years, and it was an amazing way to think through collaborative and collective labour. As a group of chronically ill people, each of us was moving through these cycles of wellness and unwellness, which meant we weren't always able to work. Oftentimes, when one person didn't feel well enough to work, another person would be able to. It was about maintaining this hydraulic system of labour that comes from collectivity. If there were multiple people working on a project, then it could happen. If we weren't feeling well, we didn't work. If we felt well, we worked.

The group was focused on patient-to-patient knowledge-sharing and trying to disrupt the hierarchical distribution of knowledge between patient and doctor. That's the ongoing function of the listserv, which is mostly for peer-to-peer support. I think it's important that people who are chronically ill and disabled have relationships with each other to circumvent the kinds of dependency that we have on hegemonic healthcare systems.

Opposite page above
Carolyn Lazard and Jesse Cohen, *Notes for the Waiting Room*, 2017, installation view. Courtesy: the artists and EFA Project Space, New York

Opposite page below
Cinema 1, Cinema 2, 2020, electric fireplaces, dimensions variable

This page right
Lazy Boi, 2020, power lift recliner, 102 × 85 × 94 cm



Previous spread
Half Life, 2022, hourglass and granite dust, 16 × 32 × 16 cm. Unless otherwise stated, all images courtesy: the artist, Maxwell Graham/Essex Street, New York, and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

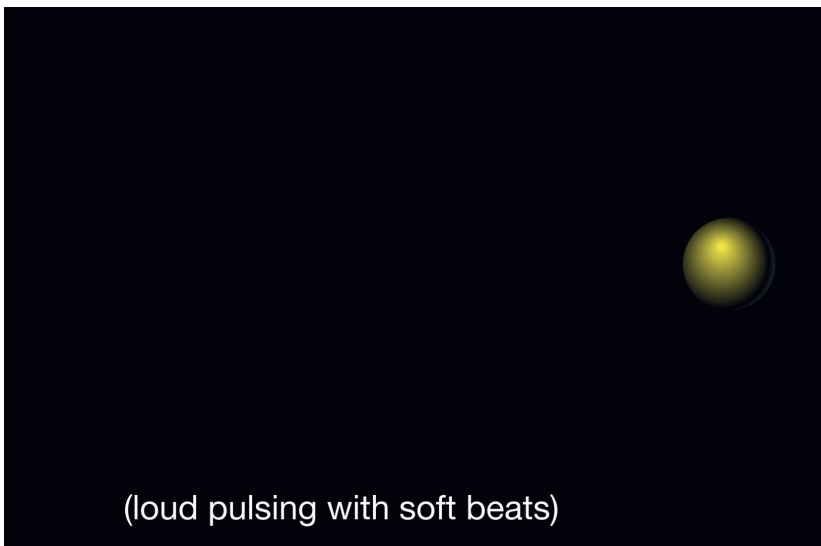
This page above
A Conspiracy, 2017, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Cell Project Space, London





Above
TVI (Dead Time),
 2020, stainless steel,
 64 × 56 × 18 cm

Below
Consensual Healing,
 2018, video still



EB What is the significance of beauty within your practice?

CL It's hard for me to think about beauty in the abstract. A lot of my recent work is critically responding to the historical legacy of avant-garde film tradition with my own krip sensibility or finding the krip sensibilities that were already there and unacknowledged. *Red* – a work I made last year for a solo exhibition at Kunstverein Braunschweig, which is currently on display in 'Greater New York' at MoMA PS1 – is a flicker film. It's responding to a specific legacy of film by artists like Tony Conrad, Peter Kubelka and Paul Sharits.

The experience of watching a flicker film is physiological. At the beginning of Tony Conrad's *The Flicker* [1966], there was what we would call today an access note saying you needed to have a doctor on hand when you showed the film, because it could trigger photosensitive epilepsy. I'm interested in the way in which access was built into these traditions and how we can think through infrastructures of access as aesthetic practices.

I made *Red* by putting my thumb over the lens of my iPhone camera and quickly lifting it off and on to create a pulsing, stroboscopic, club-like image. I wanted to make a film at the height of the pandemic but – unable to leave the house as a high-risk, immunocompromised person – the most accessible way for me to do so was to use my iPhone and my thumb, right there in the intimacy of my home. Art that can be made and shared under challenging conditions is beautiful. There's this false notion that, if you make art which is tied to or interested in the world and in social conditions, you don't care about its aesthetic value. I'm deeply invested in beauty; I just don't see the aesthetic value of art as conscripted exclusively to the relationship between the art viewer and the art object. It's everywhere: in ideas, gestures, actions, care.

EB You have an upcoming exhibition at Walker Art Center. What are the political dimensions of having your first institutional solo exhibition and what might it bring for you?

CL For the Walker show, I'm making a project that responds to the legacy of dance created with or for the camera: those collaborations between dancers and filmmakers that, from the mid-20th century, pushed film to its formal extremes. In dance films, the camera follows motion instead of narrative, stretching the medium's capacity beyond our understanding of its function.

In this project, I'm collaborating with longstanding friends from the disability arts community: dancer and choreographer Jerron Herman and poet and artist Joselia Rebekah Hughes. I'm thinking about the formal radicality of dance for camera while considering the ways in which modern dance has historically been framed as a form of art to be seen, not necessarily to be heard or felt. It's about the mutability of form through access: can a dance film exist without its image? Can dance be communicated via other sensorial means besides sight? Does film have to be a projection on a screen? Could it be a sound? These are the questions I'm asking myself. Other artists have asked similar questions, like Kayla Hamilton in her dance *Nearly Sighted* [2017].

I'm utilizing audio description, which is used in live and recorded performance as well as in film, as a way to facilitate access for blind and low-vision audiences. Access has

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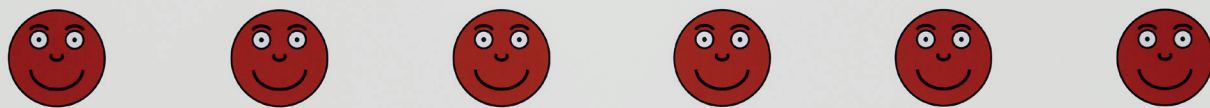


STROBE ON
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Red, 2021, video still.
Courtesy: the
artist and Kunstverein
Braunschweig

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this capacity to break through the boundaries of medium, because of the way it makes art necessarily iterative. Through access, a single artwork might exist as a description, as a notation, as sign language, as a transcript or as a tactile object – depending on what people need.

All of this said, making a film where sound is the primary element creates as much opacity as it does access. For me, this interplay between access and opacity is a Black krip thing. It's about being everywhere and nowhere at the same time. It's about modern and postmodern dance's compendium of gestures being indebted to Black improvisation, to adaptive krip movement in the world: what is visible and what is invisible.

EB This is such an important thing to think about within the broader landscape of Black art as well as in terms of how Black disabled artists fit into the art world – especially given that we're in a moment where some arts institutions seem to be urgently prioritising Blackness. At the same time, it can be tiring because it feels like there's a short shelf life in people's capacity to value Black artists and writers, especially if you add more intersections of being queer, disabled, working class, migrant and undocumented.

CL Because of the way I work, it's challenging to make art that goes into institutions without considering what will happen afterwards. I hope that my work can also be considered as praxis, that it's more than just an object which is received and then let go of. I want it to fundamentally change something materially in the world. I would hope that most artists do not want to have their work function as a liberal trophy for institutions.

Most museums seem committed to receiving Black art, Black aesthetics and Black politics – provided it's on the museum's terms. It's a complex time to be a Black artist, but when has it not been? Fundamentally, what I want – and probably what a lot of Black artists want, although I can't really speak on behalf of anyone except myself – is the end of the world as we know it. It's not just about having more Black art in museums: it's something much bigger than that **END**

Edna Bonhomme is a science historian and writer.

Carolyn Lazard is an artist. Their solo exhibition at Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, USA, is on view until 11 December.



Opposite page
Pain Scale, 2019,
installation view.
Courtesy: the
artist and Palais
de Tokyo, Paris

This page
Recto Verso, 2020,
installation view.
Courtesy: the artist
and Museum für
Moderne Kunst,
Frankfurt am Main;
photograph:
Axel Schneider