

critical studies
Slade School of Art MFA
Maggie Barrett
December 2021

12 DEGREES CELSIUS



when the Nile floods

I downloaded a running app recently, and I had to switch it to imperial units because, in the form of accumulated knowledge, I know what a mile feels like. I know what three miles feels like, and as I run, recovering from an injury, I am curious to know how I feel at mile two, and then mile three. If I were to use the app in metric units, forcing myself to learn what a kilometer feels like, I would expand the way I understand the world.

My weather app, for example, is in Celsius, even though I think in Fahrenheit, but the only thing I know for sure is what twelve degrees feels like, and that once it's around eighteen degrees, I can probably wear a t-shirt. I know what twelve feels like because that was the temperature from May to July this year in London. The day the sun came out, I abandoned my library plans and read an entire book while laying in the grass.

An airport, too is twelve degrees Celsius even when it's not. You are uncomfortable, and it is lonely. The plane itself is much warmer on boarding: the human instinct to nest is at work, everyone getting the things they will need for the journey. But half way through the flight, you wake up and the plane is twelve and you are alone.

There is a paradox to my time in London. It is in many ways hermetic, a siloed time I have given myself for reading, writing, and making. But as I started my work here, I was thinking about support structures and relational ontology and entanglement and care. I'm alone (less and less so as the months go by) and I am making work about interdependence.

But because those interests came up from having an ill family member and then experiencing grief, I am considering my work as coming from an embodied place: "the meaning is in the material," so the work is labor intensive, it is informed by personal day-to-day experience of being in a body, and how emotions and mindset change that experience.

For example, the sun is out right now and it is seventeen degrees and I am sitting in an oversized chair, and everything is good.

The book I *read* while laying in the grass on that day, was the newly published exhibition catalogue *The Shabbiness of Beauty: Moyra Davey and Peter Hujar*. This book is relevant for one reason, and that is that Eileen Myles, in her introductory essay says that Moyra Davey, “(whether she’s shooting or curating) is I think interested in the exquisite math of it.”

The books I was *supposed to be reading* that day were located inside the Science Library: a stack of geometry textbooks. This sort of serendipitous link between Myles’s comment on math and my passing interest in geometry is the sort of thing that makes me feel I’m on the right track.

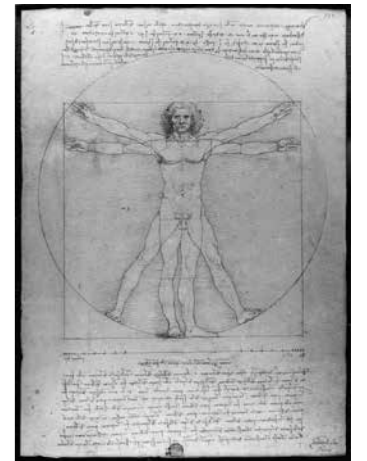
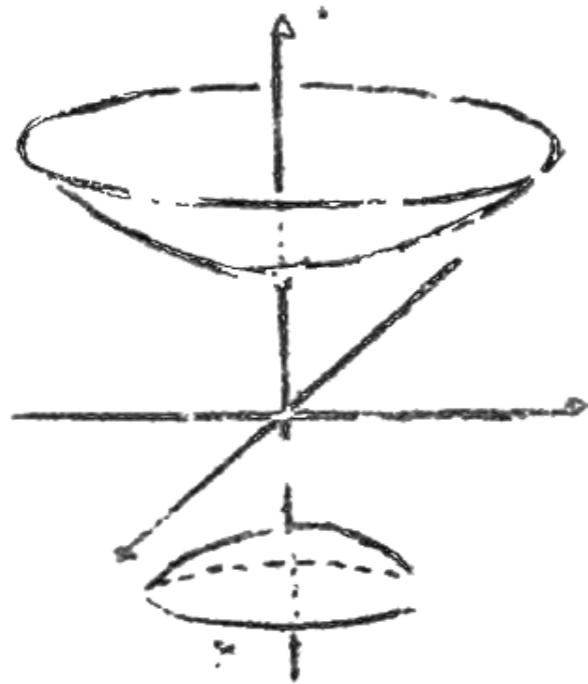
(I eventually got to those books and one of the best things I learned was that geometry was invented in Egypt as a way to map out land ownership, so that when the Nile anarchically flooded each year, the land-owners could re-trace their allotments.)

But why geometry in the first place? In Adriana Cavarero’s book *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*, she introduces the phrase “the geometric imaginary.” This phrase attracted me because I love geometry—I love formalism and design and shapes and lines—and also because this “imaginary” is how she describes the way we conceive of being in the world. She is suggesting a shift from the imaginary of the erect individual to an imaginary of inclination, being inclined: *postured towards* the other. I’ve learned that this is an idea of relational ontology, which she describes here:

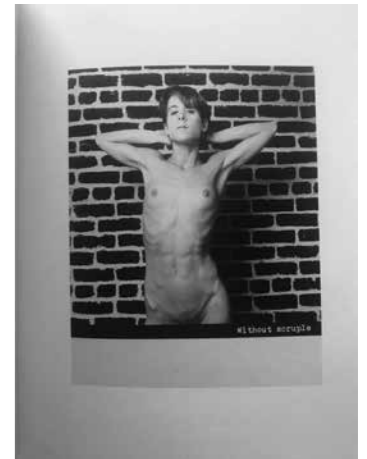
“That is to say: emphasizing vulnerability is not a matter of correcting individualistic ontology by inserting the category of relation into it. It is rather to think relation itself as originary and constitutive [...].”¹

The funny thing is, in studying these geometry text books, there really isn’t a geometric diagram that represents the autonomous, singular body, it’s much easier to find diagrams of intersecting, mutually supported angles and cones.

¹ Cavarero, Adriana. *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*. Trans Amanda Minervini and Adam Sitze. Stanford University Press, 2016.



daVinci



page from *Shabbiness of Beauty*





AUTOFICTION

To stick with Moyra Davey for the moment, the last line of her essay “Fifty Minutes” reads “Fifty Minutes is a work of autofiction.” A sampling of the subheads throughout this essay include: The Fridge, Money-Time, Vivian Gornick, Vulture/Kite. The essay covers everything from the way she (the author) uses the word “manage” in relation to the contents of her fridge to the lack of “psychologizing” in Natalia Ginzburg’s writing.

Davey does not need to define the genre she is so obviously working in, it would be as if Will Harris were to include at the end of *Rendang* that “*Rendang* is a work of poetry.” But funny enough, the last lines do refer back to the work: “RENDANG, I whisper. / RENDANG. I lay / the pages of this book / around me. I talk to them. // No, they respond. No, no.” So *Rendang* is poetry, but it is autofiction too. As Christian Lorentzen describes it, autofiction is a genre of contemporary literature in which “there tends to be emphasis on the narrator’s [...] status as a writer or artist and that the book’s creation is inscribed in the book itself.”²

Autofiction has been the seminal genre of reading for me during my master’s course. And I might throw everything I have read into this category, because it is omnivorous as a genre. Could I include Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red* in this category? Well, no in fact I cannot, because there isn’t anything actually about Carson and her lived experience in the text.

Sidenote: I think Davey’s “exquisite math” is the way she detects these secret passageways between her fridge and Natalia Ginzburg. Davey’s project is to share these passageways with the world.

² Lorentzen, Christian, “Sheila Heti, Ben Lerner, Tao Lin: How ‘Auto’ Is ‘Autofiction’?”
11 May 2018. Vulture.com

I - EMBODIED - ART

It felt paradoxical to be considering support structures and entanglement and yet persistently reading the autofiction genre that centers the self.

Autofiction insists on the I, but the I is infrequently, actually is *never* a hero. She is usually a flawed, masturbating, wreck, full of doubt and creative block and crushes and also ideas. The I in autofiction is an embodied person, and this is the crux of it. By inscribing the life experience of the author into the work, all the other people in their lives are implicated: the mastitis from breastfeeding the baby, the partner that walks in to the writer’s space, the mother that dies. The personal experience of the I makes the work inherently political. Chris Kraus, one of the genre’s first publishers says of it: “What seemed most important to me was not the fact of the ‘I’ but the way it moved through the text and the world.”³

In autofiction, any encounter with the world can be equally considered as source material for artwork; the experience, for example, of being in a gym shower and noticing the peeling yellow paint and the color of the old paint below. Yes, I feel the water, the slimy floor of a shared shower, the way the eyes drift up toward the window and then fall on the imperfection in the “babyshit yellow” wall.

³ Kraus, Chris, “The New Universal,” 17 October 2014. SydneyReviewofBooks.com

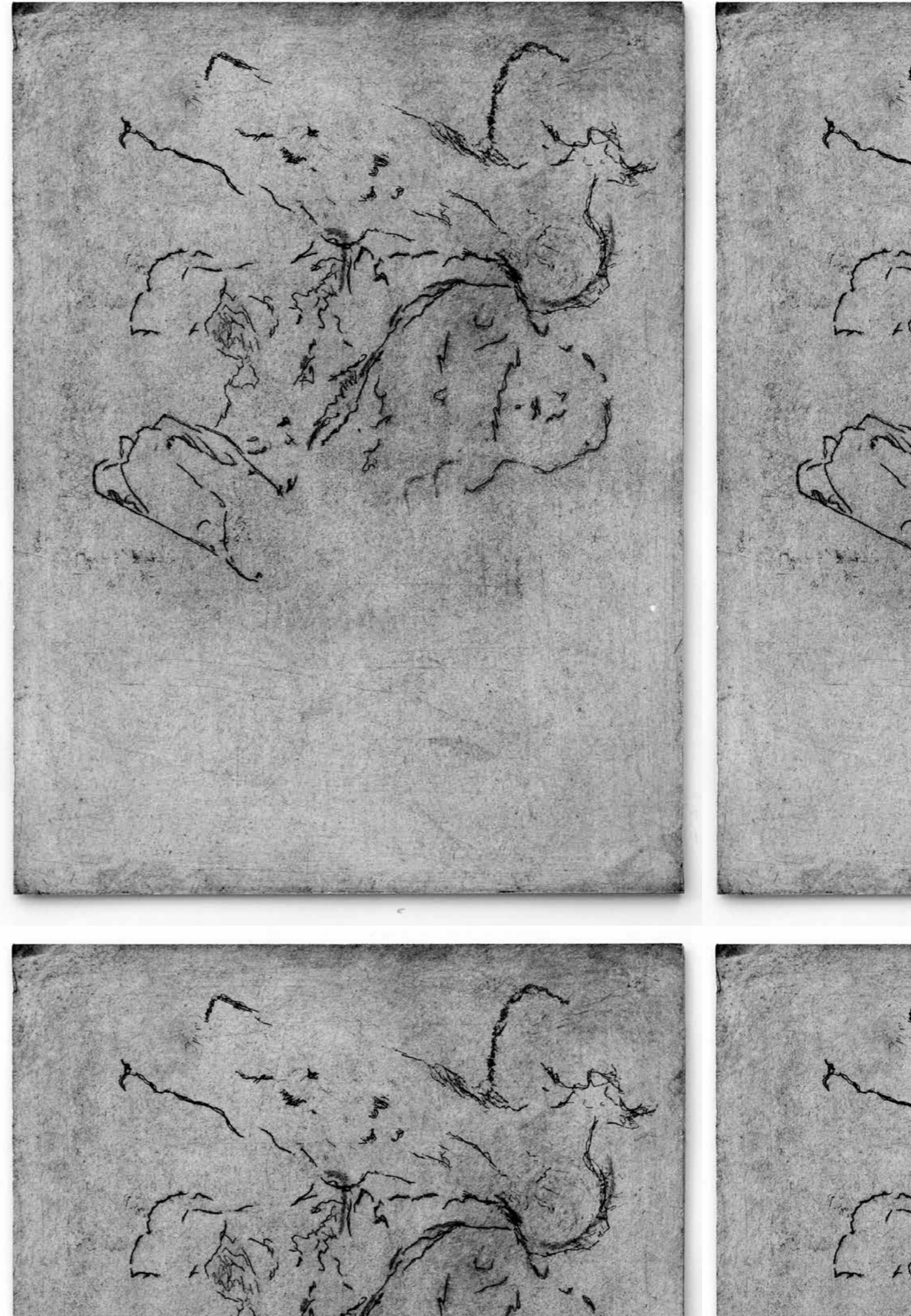
TILES

Which is exactly what happened while showering in my Brooklyn apartment, back in the U.S. during the year of COVID, where I changed my password to LondonDreamsNYCWalls. The beige tile in the shower has a marble texture printed on it, and one lightbulb has perpetually gone out.

At the time, I was reading Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*, which was existing for me as an almost visceral experience, because the character was a beautiful teenage boy exploring his sexuality, and at the same time he had wings that crunched and creaked and wanted to expand below his leather jacket. I could feel his tenderness as a boy and relate to it, and then I would feel the crackling red skin, the wings, compressed. But was he really red? What shade of red? Was this a reality I knew or an imaginary one?

In the hot shower my eyes fell on a winged body that was fucking another body from behind. And as my eyes went from one tile to the next the figures became more defined.

For the next few weeks I saw the figures fucking, and I saw more figures in the tiles as I looked. But then something odd happened which is that when I wanted to make drawings from them I couldn't find all the lines that made the two figures fuck. And I could only find forms that half-resembled what a week ago had looked SO much like a deer.



ENDURANCE



The injury that I am recovering from occurred four years ago this autumn. I ran the NYC Marathon with only a few months of official training under my belt, which is to say, I didn't train for long enough, and even though I didn't have pain during the training, I definitely did after the marathon, and it seems to be chronic. But to my surprise, the year of doing calisthenics in my bedroom may have cured the imbalance, and I am able to run again.

I ran the marathon because I was thickly grieving. Thickly as in, my body moved through the world, but I was separate from it. I couldn't wrap my head around the fact that even as I entered the subway (for example), my dad had died, now 67 days ago. My world had changed monumentally, but everything *appeared* the same.

So I ran. It was an attempt to bring myself into my body, to do something with this strange energy I had. And later that winter I made a film documenting the way people walk on freezing cold streets: clipped, tight, hurried.

That film got me thinking about the idea of endurance. Not about the endurance of running a marathon, which can be done on will power alone, but about *endurance*: how a body keeps going.

Performance Artist Ayana Evans's practice for example is about endurance. In her performances she gives herself nearly impossible tasks like doing one hundred pushups while wearing a catsuit and high heels, and she requests the viewers to circle around her and cheer her on. The performance is an explicit invitation to assist her emotionally. The crowd cannot do her pushups, but they can encourage her to do them. This is compelling because when someone you love is ill—and illness is also an endurance challenge in some ways—all you can do is offer emotional support. Only the most intimate family members and doctors get involved physically. So emotional support is the shoring up, the restoring belief that they can get through. In Evans's case, she is a black body performing in what are often majority-white spaces. So, she is also calling attention to the endurance required to survive her daily life in a systemically racist country, like the U.S.



cheering on Ayana Evans at Medium Tings, Brooklyn June 2018



TENNIS NET

There isn't one reason I made the net and there isn't one thing it stands for in my mind. Each knot being tied by hand, it was a meditation and also in some ways an endurance challenge. It was about the action of using my hands to make this thing that in some ways could symbolize a maternal figure: the net catches and also holds. The knots keep each other in place.

I associate tennis with my mom, as she has played multiple times per week my entire life. Tennis served as a constant while she cared for my dad, and while she grieved his death. And yet, the net, when installed, also functions as a barrier. Fittingly, tennis is an historic symbol of classism and racism too. Serena Williams's endurance is mental more than anything. This constellation of links to my life and to contemporary culture is what drew me to it, it is a complicated sign.



BREAKDOWN

There is a thin line between a body that endures and one that collapses. But collapse is not the only alternative, there is also an opting out, a decision to turn “off the course.”

In China’s recent labor protest movement known as *tangping* or Laying Down Flat, workers opt out of labor [while they can afford to] in the realization that working relentlessly no longer promises a better quality of life.⁴ Likewise, there is currently a trend amongst top athletes like Naomi Osaka and Simone Biles to value mental health and well-being over their place in history; perhaps with a goal to change the historical conversation around relentless pursuit. Tennis player, Naomi Osaka, withdrew from the French Open in Spring 2021 citing her mental health. Several weeks later, Simone Biles withdrew from the Olympics saying that to compete would be to put her physical well-being in danger, so she refused.

In her essay “Embracing Breakdown” Maria Puig de la Bellacasa asks the question, “From the perspective of soil care that emphasises ecopoethical affinities the question remains: how can an ethos of breakdown be fostered in a situated way, when the soils are not coping, not filtering, cannot break down all the stuff we are putting in them?”⁵

4 Author unlisted, “China Urges Its people to Struggle, Some Say No.” 3 July 2021. Economist.com

5 Puig de la Bellacasa, Maria. Embracing Breakdown: Soil Eco-poethics and the Ambivalence of Soil Remediation. (Pre-publication draft) Duke University Press, forthcoming 2021.

opposite: video stills of athlete Julie Moss at the end of an Ironman race in 1982, in which her body brokedown and she famously crawled across the finish line





Several weeks before my dad died, I was home. My mom and I were making dinner while my dad was at the dialysis center. Even though his illness was related to his lungs, he eventually had kidney failure as well. This was a body breaking down. He got home that day and I watched from inside as my mom went out to greet him. The whole frame of his body was smaller, but he wore the clothing I recognized so well, the colors and fabrics I associated with him. He got out of the car, and made it to the passenger side. When I looked out, all I saw was his body, leaning against the car for support with his head in one hand. My mom was on one side. I'd seen him vomiting and I'd seen him in hospital beds, but somehow this was the most painful.

I watched for as long as I could, and then I went back into the kitchen and made a beautiful plate of hors d'oeuvres for my cousins and aunt who were coming over. My dad made it to the dinner table that night for five minutes. It's strange how we ate and tried to continue on with the evening.



Two years later and several weeks before I moved to London, I sat in Prospect Park listening to the audio version of Jia Tolentino's *Trick Mirror*. Tolentino introduced me to Adriana Cavarero and the idea of identity as something "totally expositive and relational." This idea of understanding the self through others was transformational. In the first weeks at Slade I poured through art history books looking for examples of one body acting as a physical support for another. Through conversations about this project I learned about Celine Condorelli's research into Support Structures. In her 2009 book of the same name, she offers working definitions of the two words: "Support's first operational feature is its proximity. No support can take place outside a close encounter, getting entangled in a situation and becoming implicated in it." And for structure she writes: "Structures are not the shape of things, but the underlying principles behind how things appear, as if they resided behind a curtain."



As I walked to the trains from my East London flat that autumn, I noticed a patch of mushrooms that had popped up overnight. I couldn't help but see the mushrooms through the lens of the drawings I had been making—intertwined individuals—leaning on one another. As I've read more about mushrooms since then, I now see that mushrooms are almost too on the nose for this project about interconnectedness. It is mushrooms that break down rotten wood, and it is the mycorrhizal networks of fungus that help trees feed each other.

Long Litt Woon, in her book *The Way Through the Woods*, talks about her experience of gathering mushrooms while mourning the death of her husband. "If you want to find mushrooms, you have to turn off your cellphone, switch to mushroom mode, and simply be there—in the woods." That fall, I rented the Mamiya from Slade and spent several days every week in the woods immersed in my search for mushrooms.

EMBODIMENT AND PLEASURE

"Simply being there" is how I would describe the reason I use the darkroom. The fact that the Mamiya, with its reverse mirrors, is a pleasure to look through is precisely why I use it. There is a risk to using film, exposures can go wrong. The physicality of the work is an integral component, and that is directly related to a sense of my own well-being.

And this brings me back to the running app, and to the Hampstead Heath ladies' pond, which I plunged into for the first time later that day, barely able to catch my breath.



shoulder

15"

belly button

24"

knee

9" across
for abdomen to chest

Fr

- read draft
- make notes
- 11-1
- 1-3 working
- 3-5 draft
- pick up dark room bag
- And say
- yarns

- Ayana Evans
- Rindan Johnson
- Endurance (performance @ Patterson A.C.)

Whole essay on embodiment

grit/midset is part of rest

position endurance part of rest

edges play → getting to know

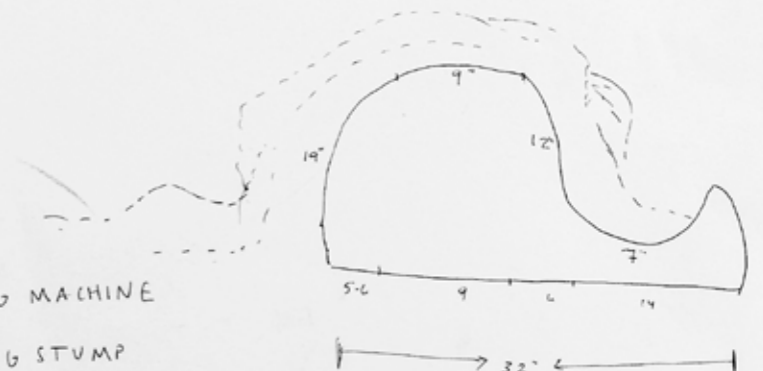
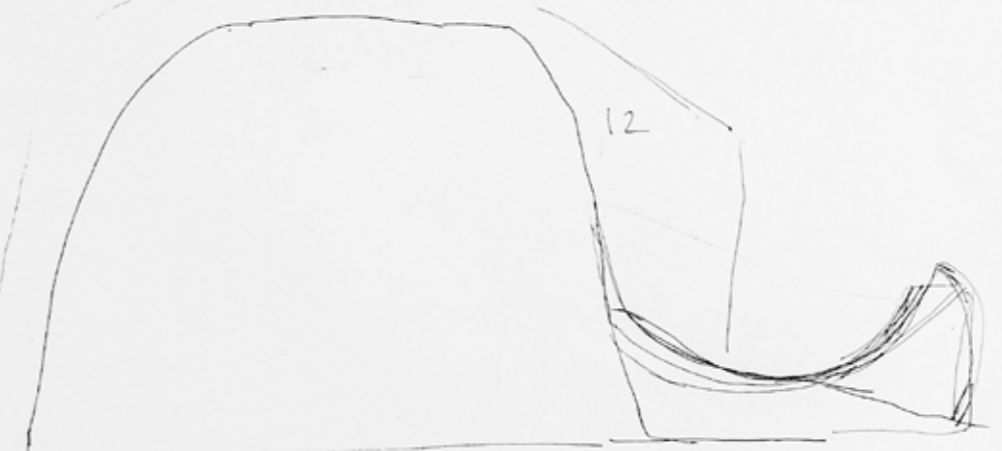


Find keratic of some things

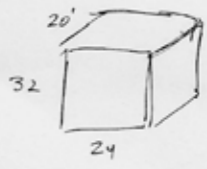
toxin + tobacco

glyphosate herbicide (fox + cuba plant)

online habits.
 Gen. Richard - Two
 Harvey Goose presentation - oil - Min
 story imbedded in all the things we've been discussing → ask that about why the Q.



DRAPING MACHINE
DRAPING STUMP
flop



Texts

Anne Carson, *Autobiography of Red*. Jonathan Cape 1999.

Adriana Cavarero, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*. Trans Amanda Minervini and Adam Sitze. Stanford University Press 2016.

Celine Condorelli *Support Structures* Sternberg Press 2009

Moyra Davey, *Index Cards* New Directions Press 2020

Sheila Heti, *Motherhood*, Penguin 2019

Will Harris, *Rendang*. Wesleyan University Press 2020

Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*. Wave Books 2009

Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Penguin 2015

Jia Tolentino, *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self Delusion*. Random House 2019

Long Litt Woon, *The Way Through the Woods*. Scribe Books, 2021

Kate Zambreno, *Drifts*, Riverhead Books 2020

The Shabbiness of Beauty: Moyra Davey and Peter Hugar, Mack Books 2021

Geometry, David A. Brannan, Matthew F. Esplen, Jeremy J. Gray, Cambridge University Press 1999