

Article

Associate/Dissociate: Allusive and Elusive Care in Veronica Ryan's Sculpture

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Abstract: Reflecting on the experience of curating Veronica Ryan's work for the 2021 exhibition *Life Support: Forms of Care in Art and Activism* at Glasgow Women's Library, this essay contextualizes the artist's recent sculptures in relation to the theories, philosophies, and ethics of care that have recently gained increasing prominence in artistic and curatorial practice. Drawing on the philosopher Virginia Held's understanding of care as inherently intersubjective, it proposes that Ryan's sculptures model a comparable understanding of caring relations through their associative yet ultimately elusive operations. Ryan is recognized for her use of abstracted organic forms, particularly seeds, pods, husks, and fruits. Since moving to New York from Britain in 1990 and developing a career between the two countries, Ryan has engaged with industrial and mass-produced receptacles, molds, and packing materials, an interest which has expanded to include fishing wire, plastic bottles, and take-away food containers, alongside textiles. Yet, although many of these elements remain identifiable, the resulting works delight in category confusion between organic and prefabricated, instigating uncanny textural effects that engender perceptual uncertainty. Their chains of allusion resist singular, fixed meanings, generating a continual back and forth of association and dissociation that constitutes a sustained meditation on care's relational complexity.

Keywords: abstraction; allusion; care; embodiment; health; sculpture; social reproduction; support



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In 2021, the artist Veronica Ryan opened a major exhibition at Spike Island in Bristol, supported by an award from the Freelands Foundation for women artists whose careers have not received art world or public recognition proportionate to their achievement. While the show included sculptures and drawings from earlier in Ryan's oeuvre, much of the work had been made between 2020 and 2021, partly while in residence at Spike Island, amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic. Although not explicitly referenced in Ryan's sculptures for *Along a Spectrum*—which, as many critics have noted, operate in ways that are 'indeterminate, elusive, allusive and contingent,' in the words of the art historian Dorothy Price—the health and care crises exposed and exacerbated by the pandemic, and the socio-political response to it, shaped the rich terrain of reference encompassed by the work in the exhibition (Price 2021a, p. 24).

Concerns relating to the body, health, and care were particularly present in a group of small sculptures placed directly on the floor and arranged into an apparently haphazard, vulnerable-seeming configuration entitled *Infection* (2020–21) (Figure 1). The individual sculptures that constituted this installation included fragments of plaster casts, perhaps of plastic bottles or other packaging materials, either parceled up in permeable netting or bound together with florescent thread and proffered on tray-like platters. A neat stack of take-away food containers sat at the center of a yellow crocheted doily; a bag of small spheres suggestive of nuts or seeds rested on a medical-looking support cushion; and a pile of forms like sloughed-off husks were bound together with green twine. Invoking the warding-off of infection through processes of separation, distancing, and food preparation, the sculptures also implicitly questioned the very premise of infection through category confusion and blurring between clear definitions such as 'natural', 'organic', 'industrial',

‘biological’, and ‘mass produced’. The material references of the sculptures gathered in *Infection* initiated a constant oscillation between association and dissociation, recognition and confusion, but while their arrangement and intent remained oblique, the multiform elements of the work were bound together by dynamics of care.



Figure 1. Veronica Ryan, *Infection* (2020–2021) (detail), bronze, plaster, paper, plastic net, seeds, other materials, dimensions variable. Commissioned by Spike Island, Bristol and supported by Freelands Foundation. Copyright Veronica Ryan. Courtesy of Spike Island, Bristol, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York and Alison Jacques, London. Photograph by Max McClure.

If care in its most generative manifestations might be said to be predicated on the dynamics of empathy and nurture, then it arguably operates associatively and relationally. It is this conviction that lies at the heart of the feminist philosopher Virginia Held’s understanding of care ethics, which, she argues, is predicated on seeing people ‘as relational and interdependent, morally and epistemologically’ (Held 2005, pp. 13–14). An ethics of care, Held maintains, ‘addresses rather than neglects moral issues arising in relations among the unequal and dependent, relations that are often laden with emotion and involuntary’ (Held 2005, p. 13). As Held’s analysis intimates, care’s very relationality means that it occupies an ethically complex terrain, liable to exploitation, coercion, and control as much as nurture, love, and support. In her feminist philosophy of love, bell hooks notes that care might be still present where love itself is absent (hooks 2021, p. 9, 19, 25). *Infection* encapsulates how Ryan’s sculptures encourage associations on the part of the viewer, yet simultaneously complicate and even sometimes wrong-foot these associative trains of thought. The complex allusive and relational—but also dissociative and potentially alienating—effects of these sculptures, I propose, offer a sustained meditation on the shifting dynamics of care.

In connecting the conceptual, perceptual, and often deeply psychological ramifications of care in Ryan’s work to wider discourses on care, I am expanding on the thinking that developed around an exhibition featuring Ryan’s work, which I co-curated with Caroline Gausden, Kirsten Lloyd, and Nat Raha at Glasgow Women’s Library (GWL), also in 2021. *Life Support: Forms of Care in Art and Activism* opened shortly after pandemic social-distancing restrictions began to be lifted in Scotland, conditions in which care became particularly important but also especially challenging, as we have reflected on together (Gausden et al. 2023). For this group exhibition, which set up home in multiple spaces across the library, we presented three works by Ryan spanning her career—*Lamentations in*

the Garden (2000), *Particles* (2017), and *Cocoa Passion* (2021)—alongside projects by artists including Kate Davis, Manual Labours, Greer Lankton, Olivia Plender, Franki Raffles, Martha Rosler, and Alberta Whittle. Works by these practitioners were interwoven with materials drawn from GWL's archives relating to its 30 years of grassroots feminist support and care for communities and audiences, which foregrounded the library's aspiration to act as a living resource concerned less with establishing and maintaining collections than with nurturing interpersonal connections.¹ A set of key questions framed our curatorial process:

What are the support structures needed to maintain life? Who is included and excluded from them? How have individuals and communities organised to gain access to these systems, and to change them? What expanded notions of 'life support' have been pursued via activism, strikes, and protest, but also ritual, utopianism, and the creation of alternative spaces and domesticities? How might housing and anti-gentrification struggles overlap with ecological concerns and intersectional feminisms? How have artistic communities of care challenged private and state attempts to control whose lives get support? (Gausden et al. 2021, p. 4)

Although these queries were asked explicitly in relation to Ryan's work in *Life Support*, they are equally applicable to the sculptural propositions made in *Along a Spectrum*, and elsewhere in Ryan's career, particularly a series of sculptures developed during a 2017 residency at the Art House, Wakefield. In this reflective essay, I am concerned with how the processes of association and dissociation instilled in the viewer by Ryan's sculptures embody the relational approach essential to care ethics. Through abstracted—if still often partially recognizable—arrangements of forms, Ryan's work asks ethical and philosophical questions about what conditions prompt empathy, relation, and care, examining the powers of association and the alienating effects of dissociation, alongside the desire for separation and protection.

1. Caring Contexts

Ryan's allusive vocabulary of care in sculptural assemblages like *Infection* sits in suggestive relation to the explosion of writing, thinking, and curating around care ethics in contemporary art which informed *Life Support*. Although turbocharged by the structural inequalities brought to greater visibility and further entrenched by the pandemic, this interest builds on the Marxist feminist discourse of social reproduction theory, which has consistently highlighted the centrality of unwaged or low-waged labor, often not formally identified as work, to the maintenance of capitalist life, analyzing how this labor—including activities such as childcare, cleaning, and cooking—is gendered, classed, and racialized (Weeks 2011, p. 29). As the feminist scholar Nancy Fraser articulates: 'variously called *care*, *affective labor*, or, *subjectivation*, this activity forms capitalism's human subjects, sustaining them as embodied natural beings while also constituting them as social beings, forming their *habitus* and the cultural ethos in which they move' [emphasis in original] (Fraser 2017, p. 23). During the 1970s, Marxist feminist thinkers and activists including Silvia Federici, Selma James, and Mariarosa Dalla Costa attempted to counter the artificial privatization of socially reproductive labor into the feminized domestic realm through the vehicle of Wages for Housework, an international campaign that developed primarily through networks in Italy, Britain, and North America (Cox and Federici 1976; Toupin 2018). Even at the point of its emergence, other Marxist feminists—particularly Black feminist thinkers—critiqued Wages for Housework for its reductive understanding of housework and its organization around white, bourgeois subjectivity in the Global North. Angela Davis elucidated how: 'cleaning women, domestic workers, maids—these are the women who know better than anyone else what it means to receive wages for housework. [...] In the United States, women of color—and especially Black women—have been receiving wages for housework for untold decades' (Davis [1981] 2019, p. 213–14). Calling for the 'socialization of housework' rather than 'wages for housework', Davis anticipated the question 'who cleans the world?' posed by writer and activist Françoise Vergès in a call to consider the unequal distribution of socially reproductive care work

under racial capitalism's global hegemony (Davis [1981] 2019, p. 219; Vergès [2019] 2021, pp. 78–82).

In contemporary curatorial practice, the prominence of care ethics has been fueled by a re-consideration of what it means to curate, closely informed by intersectional feminist and queer perspectives, which returns to the term's Latin root (the verb *curare* meaning 'to care') (Krasny and Perry 2023, p. 4). Elke Krasny and Lara Perry propose that this reassessment of curating as care, focused on people rather than objects, emerges at the fulcrum of two crises: 'the persistent crisis of social and ecological care that characterizes global politics and the more recent professional crisis of curating' (Krasny and Perry 2023, p. 1). The two are fundamentally interlinked, with the crisis in curating itself a response to calls for greater consciousness of how the profession is rooted in European colonial and imperial histories, involving theft, looting, and the removal by force of artefacts and artworks from their makers and communities (Krasny and Perry 2023, p. 3). This recognition necessitates confronting what Krasny, together with Sophie Lingg and Lena Fritsche, have elsewhere identified as the 'violent legacies of care and exploitation. . . historically produced under the conditions of colonial capitalism, racist patriarchy, and mainstream/liberal/white feminism' (Krasny et al. 2021, p. 12). Equally, the 'crisis of care' resulting from austerity politics and increased precarity has impacted curating as a profession (Fraser 2017, p. 21). The study of care ethics reveals shifting power dynamics, issues of exploitation and control, and a lack of basic care structures in society.

While illuminating the centrality of socially reproductive labor to capitalist life—which curator Helena Reckitt notes has often been 'devalued and made invisible', only noticed 'when it has been withdrawn'—feminists working with social reproduction theory have also drawn attention to care's radical potential (Reckitt 2020, p. 198). Urging greater analysis of social reproduction struggles in histories of art, Angela Dimitrakaki and Kirsten Lloyd point to the re-politicization of care, highlighting 'the potential of care to counter the extractive, individualising pressures wrought by capitalist globalisation's processes of accumulation' (Dimitrakaki and Lloyd 2017, p. 8). Dimitrakaki and Lloyd's position chimes with Kathi Weeks's expanded conceptualization of social reproduction as including 'the production of the forms of social cooperation on which accumulation depends or, alternatively, as the rest of life beyond work that capital seeks continuously to harness to its times, spaces, rhythms, purposes, and values' (Weeks 2011, p. 29). Considered in tandem with Held's conviction that care is fundamentally relational and predicated on recognizing the bonds between people, these perspectives illuminate how care increasingly forms a site at which multiple political concerns intersect, encompassing violence and repression, but also consciousness-building, pleasure, and freedom.

It is this ambiguous and elastic, constantly mutating potential of care that Ryan's allusive work calls attention to. In Ryan's sculptures, the allusive qualities of care include its elusive nature, intimating that care might be absent as much as present, and, as socially reproductive labor, exploit as much as support (on the ontological and political ambivalence of care, see Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, p. 7). Ryan's work makes a particularly compelling and complicated contribution to the discourse around care ethics, socially reproductive labor, and curating with care, both through its deployment of materials and the ways in which the resulting sculptures are positioned in relation to the viewer. The installation of *Infection* at Spike Island was a case in point, scattered across the floor in an arrangement that seemed simultaneously random, yet carefully considered (see Figure 1). In *Along a Spectrum*, the distribution of *Infection*'s multiple, small, and often precariously balanced sections directly onto the ground, without a barrier, forced audiences to take tangible care.

Some parts of *Infection* moreover appear as if they have been damaged already. *Infection XVII* (2020) is a plaster cast of what could have once been a piece of plastic packaging (Figure 2). Six circular declivities evoke the pockets used to cushion the tender skins of fruits, or the flaky carapaces of baked pastries, during transportation. Ryan began incorporating found materials relating to food preparation and storage in the years after she moved to New York from Britain in 1990, when she had a studio on the Bowery:

'Bleecker Street has a lot of shops and restaurants with kitchenware and stainless steel and lots of cake stands and little cake containers, and it was really exciting collecting those objects' (Ryan 2000, p. 4). Yet the stark contrast between the stainless-steel food containers that attracted Ryan in the early 1990s and the battered, bathetic form of *Infection XVII* is instructive. The plaster cast has captured every dent in the friable plastic, conveying a sense that whatever it housed has been consumed or discarded along with the packaging itself. In one of the sections nestles a small circle of textile, stitched using bands of red and pinkish thread, which in turn cradles fragments bound together with yellow twine, suggesting an attempt to patch a hole or tear.



Figure 2. Veronica Ryan, *Infection XVII*, 2020, plaster and thread. Copyright Veronica Ryan. Courtesy of the artist, Alison Jacques, London and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

Infection XVII embodies processes and practices of care in multiple ways. Its material indexing of plastic food packaging connects the work to meal preparation and sustenance—an important concern across Ryan's practice—while the round textile segment conjures mending and maintenance.² The work's constitution from the detritus of capitalism and commodification intimately connects to the care/cleaning labor that Vergès demonstrates is demanded of gendered, classed, and racialized workers, in order to 'create a world suitable for hyper-consumption and maintaining institutions' (Vergès [2019] 2021, p. 77). Like Davis, Vergès contextualizes care and cleaning work in relation to capitalism's roots in enslavement, indenture, and colonization (Vergès [2019] 2021, p. 73). For, Vergès writes, 'Capitalism is an economy of waste, and this waste must disappear before the eyes of those who are entitled to enjoy a good life' (Vergès [2019] 2021, p. 77). *Infection XVII*, together with other sculptures such as *Catching Bait* (2022), in which crushed plastic bottles are ensnared in a tightly bound carapace of webbing and vegetable net, or *Collective Moments XVII* (2022), which consists of a soft blue scrap of plastic packaging, salvage capitalism's chaotic reams of rubbish and offcuts in an attempt to ameliorate its uncaring effects, from the exhaustion visited on individual workers to ecological damage and pollution.

The ultimate effect of *Infection XVII* remains ambivalent. An indictment of plastic packaging waste, and by extension the links between racial capitalism, coloniality, and ecological destruction, the sculpture might equally constitute an act of repair. The relationship between *Infection's* engagement with domestic processes such as meal preparation, cooking, sewing, cleaning, mending, tidying, and arranging, and thereby with the broader context of socially reproductive care work, perhaps comes closest to the position outlined by the Marxist feminist Martha E. Giménez, who proposes that the domestic realm provides an important potential space of non-alienated labor. Articulating a dialectical argument that 'domestic labour is neither total drudgery, oppression, the terrain of "animal functions", nor the main destiny to which all women should aspire', Giménez contends that it 'can include activities and experiences of agency, self-realisation, caring, reciprocity, and co-

operation, which are the material basis for the emergence of needs and values critical of the selfish, competitive, and dehumanising world of capitalist work and social relations' (Giménez 2019, p. 269). Comparably, hooks identified 'the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous' as an important refuge from white supremacist society for Black American families, with a 'radical political dimension' (hooks 1990, p. 42). Despite the potentially negative connotations of the installation's title, *Infection* expresses the pleasure of placement and creative organization inherent in Giménez's account of domestic labor as 'an important material base for the persistence and strengthening of intimate care bonds' (Giménez 2019, p. 268). Yet even these accounts do not capture the ambivalent and shifting affectual sense of care that emerges through the visual encounter with Ryan's work, particularly its physical and psychological implications.

2. Support Structures

Within the formal and material vocabularies that Ryan has developed since her career as a sculptor began in the 1980s, some of the most immediate explorations of care manifest in references to, and uses of, pillows. Several sculptures in *Infection* incorporate medical pillows, as did other works in *Along a Spectrum*, including for example an eye-popping hot fuchsia cushion shaped like a double donut which hung from the wall. The main section of *Infection III* (2020) consists of a yellow CPAP pillow, a rigid rectangular shape with two semi-circular holes cut into either end (Figure 3). These holes provide space for the mask and tube sometimes diagnosed for sufferers of sleep apnea, which regulates their breathing through the night. Designed for propping and supporting the body—by implication the body in pain or discomfort, or in need of rest—the pillows link to the infrastructure of the care industry which Vergès, Fraser, and others have highlighted as an acute site of the contemporary care crisis, exemplifying how devalued care work is gendered and racialized (Vergès [2019] 2021, p. 78).



Figure 3. Veronica Ryan, *Infection III*, 2020, plaster, paper netting, cast of CPAP medical cushion. Copyright Veronica Ryan. Courtesy of the artist, Alison Jacques, London and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

Ryan's sculptural examination of the physical and conceptual associations with comfort and support embedded into pillows, particularly medical pillows, has developed from ongoing concerns. During 2017, Ryan undertook a residency at the Art House in Wakefield, which resulted in her first large-scale solo exhibition in the UK for over two decades (Ryan 2017a). Ryan's fascination with pillow forms, medical materials, fruit cush-

ions, and padding grew through this project, which provided the opportunity to unite key themes from her practice, while developing new aspects of her thinking about pillow forms (Ryan 2017b). During the Art House residency, Ryan became particularly interested 'in the way that pillows have this medical function for cervical, spinal problems and different kinds of pillows are used for different parts of the body' (Ryan 2017a). Large, rectangular pillow forms proliferated in the final exhibition, entitled *Salvage*, stacked inside an upright, medical-looking metal armature for *Protectors* (2017) (Figure 4); tie-dyed and piled on top of each other in a soft geological mass in *Layered, Strata* (2017); and scattered in a fallen heap for *Grey Matter* (2017) (Figure 5). Smaller pillow shapes also appeared in the large-scale sculpture *Particles*, co-commissioned by Hepworth Wakefield and displayed at the museum in conjunction with *Salvage*, and in works that alluded to the sculptural precedents of Barbara Hepworth and Louise Bourgeois.



Figure 4. Veronica Ryan. *Protectors*, 2017. Copyright Veronica Ryan. Courtesy of The Art House, Wakefield. Photograph: Jules Lister.



Figure 5. Veronica Ryan. *Grey Matter*, 2017. Copyright Veronica Ryan. Courtesy of The Art House, Wakefield. Photograph: Jules Lister.

This formal exploration sparked an interest in the history of psychiatric hospitals and the medical establishment, prompting Ryan to visit the nearby Wakefield Mental Health Museum at the Fieldhead Hospital to see ‘one of the few remaining padded cells’ in Britain in their collection (Ryan 2017a). *Protectors*, with its bright-red metal frame, is perhaps the sculpture that raises the specter of institutionalized confinement most explicitly, reverberating with the influential critiques of mental health treatment in Britain and the US pioneered by figures such as Erving Goffman in his ground-breaking 1961 book *Asylums* (Goffman [1961] 2022). Ryan felt that the padded cell did not only have negative connotations of confinement and abuse, but also offered an ‘insulated’ and ‘womblike’ space, marking a concerted attempt on the part of medical professionals to grapple with post-traumatic stress (Ryan 2017a). At the same time, in considering the history of pillows and padding in medical treatment, Ryan emphasizes how access to care and health support for people in the UK and the US, the two countries between which the artist divides her time, continues to be deeply gendered, classed, and racialized, with people of color experiencing higher levels of incarceration and trauma due to racism and white supremacy (Ryan 2017a). Ryan’s pillow forms intrinsically relate to bodies in need of support, nurture, and care, but also to bodies that might *not* be getting care. They prompt viewers to think about the relationship between the body and the mind, and the oppressions created by normative understandings of both.³

Although the ramifications of the pillow form seem to have taken on especial urgency during the Art House residency, it has long been an important formal aspect of Ryan’s work, providing the structural core of perhaps one of her best-known early sculptures, *Relics in the Pillow of Dreams* (1985). A large floor sculpture made of plaster, *Relics* consists of an undulating square pillow shape, its surface scattered with small, vessel-like objects, some of which seem about to sink out of sight (Figure 6). The first part of the title prompts connections with archaeological fragments and reliquaries, while the second indicates that the small bronze pods, seeds, or containers offer analogies for the operations of memory. These components correlate with the two key characteristics of dreams identified by Sigmund Freud in his psychoanalytic writings: condensation and displacement (transference) (Freud 1976, p. 417; Price 2021a, p. 24). *Relics in the Pillows of Dreams* occupies a hypnagogic

zone, a time between sleeping and waking when the mind's associative and creative powers were thought by Freud to be at their most acute.



Figure 6. Veronica Ryan, *Relics in the Pillow of Dreams*, 1985, plaster and bronze, 300 × 1540 × 1540 mm. Copyright Veronica Ryan. Tate, presented by Charles Saatchi 1992. Photo: © Tate.

The medical pillows of Ryan's later works might seem to be speaking a very different referential language than the fantastical memoryscape of *Relics in the Pillow of Dreams*. Yet the diverse periods in Ryan's oeuvre are linked by an interest in the concept of support, psychological and physical. They figure support as a form of care, linked to the body but also the mind, through invocations of propping up, rest, comfort, warmth, and remembrance. Moreover, across these ostensibly quite different sculptures, association and materiality are often engaged in a complex dance. Just as *Relics in the Pillow of Dreams* ossifies the roiling softness of the pillow into a monumental form, in *Infection III* the rounded interstices where the breathing apparatus would normally rest instead provide shelter for small, votive-like items, made from plaster casts and shreds of orange and green paper netting. The CPAP medical cushion is moreover itself a plaster cast, resulting in a hard surface rather than the firm but yielding support that might be anticipated. The strange, lichen-like tufts of orange and green netting that garland the smaller casts link back to the surrealist terrain of *Relics in the Pillow of Dreams*. If, as David Getsy and Anne Wagner have proposed, sculpture is of all the art forms the most closely connected to the material world by virtue of its proximity to the objects around us, and its scaling 'in relation to the human body', then *Infection III* suggests that these associations might be partial, uncanny, or even misrecognitions (Getsy 2015, p. 5; Wagner 2012, p. 104).

The initial verisimilitude of *Infection III* triggers perceptual confusion, making an association with a mode of medical support but then challenging this connection through unexpected materials. As Ryan herself has put it: 'I like the sense that you don't quite know what's there' (Ryan 2021a, p. 73). In Price's analysis, 'the nurturing qualities of these cushions are disavowed and their somatic invitations to provide comfort and respite for the aching body are refused' (Price 2021a, p. 26). Such interpretative adjustments require an

openness on the viewer's part to uncertainty. *Infection V* (2020) is reminiscent of the metal dishes used in operating theatres such as surgical kidney trays. Yet rather than stainless steel, *Infection V* is made from pinkish wax, so that it looks more like one of the internal organs such a tray might hold. The use of wax exacerbates these bodily connotations, while its pliable qualities suggest a supple and malleable entity whose shape could be easily recomposed. Such adjustments encourage consideration of who gets access to care, and of what care is. Ryan's sculptures ask viewers to imagine how it feels when support is taken away, or becomes a source of oppression as much as solace. Their associative operation, and the centrality of care to that operation, echoes Held's emphasis on the insistently interdependent nature of care ethics—its requirement that the individual consider other perspectives, and hold interpretative multiplicity in play (Held 2005, p. 15).

3. Bodies and Objects

While discussions about care and support in contemporary curatorial practice often approach these concerns from sociological, historical, and political perspectives, the use of allusion in Ryan's work results in a more abstracted treatment of their implications, even as her sculptures' component parts—thread, pins, netting, packaging, plastic bottles, trays, dried flowers, pillows—remain identifiable. The critic Rachel Spence aptly describes Ryan's materials as 'so faithful to their physical roots yet resistant to obvious narratives', eschewing representation or literalism (Spence 2021). *Associate/Dissociate*—the work from which this article takes its titular cue—consists of four mass-produced teabags stitched together into a rectangle, tightly tessellated like a miniature quilt (Figure 7). The words 'dissociate' and 'associate' have been intently sewn into the thin, papery surfaces of the two top teabags. The bags seem at some point to have become slightly wet, before drying again. Their edges buckle with the aftereffects of brownish, tealeaf-colored stains, which in places creates a beautiful filigree reminiscent of the patterns generated through tie-dye, a process Ryan has used elsewhere.



Figure 7. Veronica Ryan, *Associate/Dissociate*, c. mid 2000s, teabags, thread, 2 × 23 × 19 cm. Copyright Veronica Ryan. Courtesy of Alison Jacques, London.

The words encapsulate the connotative operation of Ryan's sculptures, which explore how associations are made, but also questioned and broken. *Associate/Dissociate* is made of eminently perishable materials—a more inherently every day and designedly disposable object than the teabag might be hard to find—yet when displayed in 2023 at Alison Jacques Gallery in London, it was carefully, even reverently, affixed to the wall with two slender silver pins. The bags have a pillow-like quality, as if in a distant echo of the padded cell, while the visible stitching evokes sutured wounds in the process of healing. The act of making a cup of tea—for oneself or another—is often invoked in Britain as a stereotypically national form of care. Ryan's use of tea bags (and elsewhere of tea to stain fabric) sets in motion a chain of connections with colonialism and empire, while referencing how their legacies are often occluded in daily life in Britain.⁴ Price notes that in Ryan's work, 'the entangled histories of trade and Empire are suggested but never forced', so that *Associate/Dissociate* speaks to the repression of colonial histories in Britain, but also the shifting, even treacherous, interrelation of association, memory, and care (Price 2021a, p. 24).

Although Ryan became known in Britain during the 1980s for her work using organic forms, such as the small pods and seed-like objects scattered over the surface of *Relics in the Pillow of Dreams*, the artist has explained: 'there was a whole period when I got really anxious and didn't make any work with a fruit or vegetable component. I felt some of the earlier work was being seen as decorative and not very serious' (Ryan 2021b). The art historian Monique Kerman, drawing on interviews with Ryan, expands on this to explain that the critical analysis of organic forms was often linked to an expectation by many in the art world that Ryan's work would engage with identity, specifically Caribbean identity (Ryan was born in Montserrat before her family migrated to Britain) (Kerman 2018, p. 58). Equally, while Ryan participated in exhibitions associated with the British Black Arts Movement during the 1980s, Alice Correia notes in her 2022 collection of curatorial and artistic texts from this decade that: 'In the highly charged 1980s little space was given to those artists, such as Simone Alexander, Joy Gregory, Eugene Palmer and Veronica Ryan, whose work was not overtly political or confrontational' (Correia 2022, p. xx; see also Chambers 2014, pp. 159–62).⁵ Correia's insight correlates with Leon Wainwright's call for a phenomenological approach to works by Black British artists. Wainwright proposes phenomenology as a way of illuminating the 'perceptual dimensions' of works which might not fit with 'the model of diaspora cultural formation' and its 'attempt to link visual practices with discursive cultural identity', whereby aspects of artworks 'that are not so easily locatable within the milieu of cultural difference go unrecognised or remain invisible' (Wainwright 2017, p. 36).

A phenomenological approach highlights the aspects of Ryan's work that relate to embodiment and the sensorial, as well as their associative instability. *Infection X* (2021) comprises a plastic seed tray, the repeated segments of which Ryan has filled with plaster and embedded with found objects. It is however not immediately possible to decipher what they might once have been (Figure 8). Instead, their vague, almost shadowy presences pulse beneath the surface, with goutts of thread periodically breaking through. The seed tray's serried compartments form an underlying armature that persists despite the plaster, meaning that *Infection X* is structured according to the modernist paradigm of the grid (Krauss 1981, pp. 54–58). However, the strictures of this grid are partially obscured by the plaster, which is in turn disrupted by the blister or wound-like excretions. It is difficult to determine a direct set of associations for this sculpture, but equally impossible to dissociate it from bodily connotations. *Infection X* demonstrates the link between allusion and abstract sculpture vocabularies in Ryan's work, but also departs from the formal devices of modernist abstraction through its cultivation of association, and the destabilizing way in which it invites and interrupts connective relays.

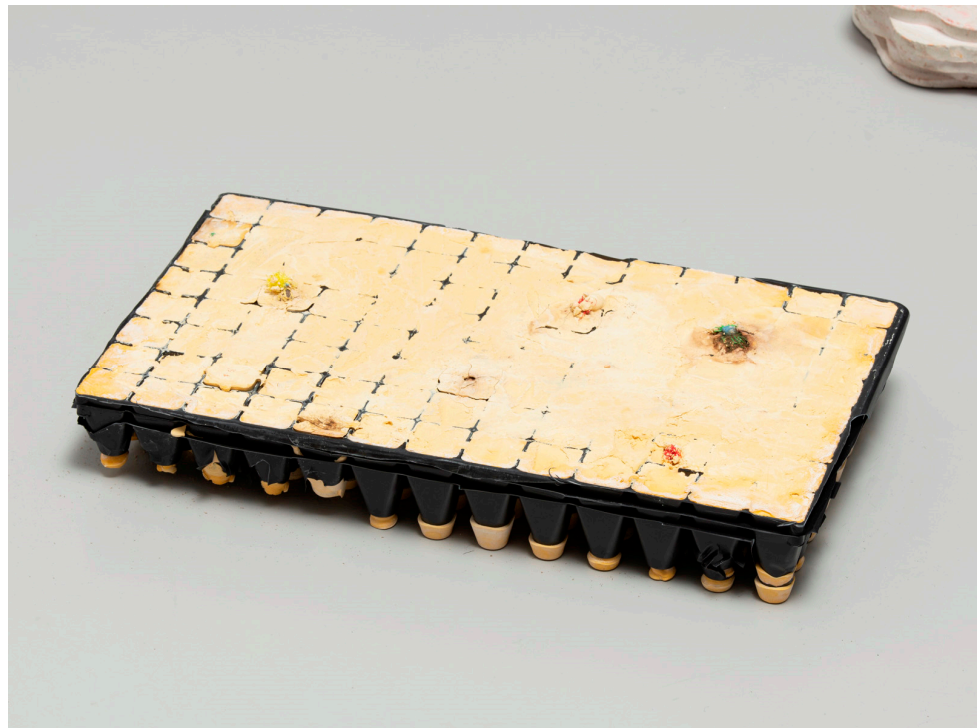


Figure 8. Veronica Ryan, *Infection X*, 2021, seed tray, plaster, thread, found objects. Copyright Veronica Ryan. Courtesy of the artist, Alison Jacques, London and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

Infection X's allusions to the bodily situate this work within the genealogies of minimalism and post-minimalism that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in the US. As Getsy has argued, while the abstract modes of sculptural making developed through these practices may have 'sought to leave the imaging of the human form behind', much of the resulting work nevertheless insistently 'activated the body as its analogue' (Getsy 2015, p. 13). Getsy argues that this generated precisely the kinds of 'topical abstraction' with which this Special Issue is concerned, opening up space in the work of the artists he addresses (including David Smith and Dan Flavin) for re-conceiving gender as multiple rather than binary, through the manifestation of 'transgender capacity' (Getsy 2015, p. 35). Getsy builds on the curating and writing of Lucy Lippard, notably her 1966 exhibition *Eccentric Abstraction* at the Fischbach Gallery, New York, and on the extensive sculpture scholarship that has responded to Lippard's initial provocation. The art historian Briony Fer, for example, examined how the sculptors gathered in Lippard's exhibition, particularly Bourgeois and Eva Hesse—whose 1979 Whitechapel Gallery exhibition made a significant impression on Ryan (Ryan 2020, p. 209)—embraced what the critic Michael Fried influentially termed 'objecthood', but moved well beyond 'literalness' and 'mere thing-like status', 'not by repairing the rift and returning to the object in its aesthetic plenitude, but by taking it even further down the road of literalness itself and into a realm of excessive, bodily materiality' (Fer 1999, p. 27; Fried 1998). Crucially, Fer's argument is not that postminimalism's abstractions led directly back to the body, but rather that, as Getsy expounds, they radically destabilized what might be thought of as a body.

Fer vitally proposed that the sculpture associated with 'eccentric abstraction' resulted in 'a condition of viewing objects that would deal not with bodily empathies so much as what gets lost in the very processes of identification, lost in the sense of falling into pieces of a subject in disintegration' (Fer 1999, p. 36). Such an analysis is equally applicable to the relay of association and dissociation that Ryan's sculptural manipulation of objects often sets in motion. In this process, it is not simply that an action of association might be followed by its opposite (dissociation), but rather that association itself might occasion a moment of psychic loss for the subject. The sculptures in the *Infection* series exist in

this space between identification and loss. On the one hand, the word ‘infection’ contains negative connotations, carrying with it the fear of proximity and touch instilled by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the sculptures might equally offer protection against infection, as well as the damage wrought by the idea of infection and the psychological distress it can instill. *Infection VI* (2020) consists of shards of plaster that have been tightly bound back together with pink thread. The way in which they have been bound preserves a sense of their fragmentation, rather than gesturing toward exact re-making. Price observes that ‘the binding of trauma is evoked in many of Ryan’s works’, particularly those in which ‘fragments of organic matter have been sheathed with medical grade bandage’ (Price 2021b, p. 12). Yet the bandages that reference acts of bodily and psychological repair are only ‘a temporary fix’, intimating that care is a continual process of relation rather than an endpoint (Price 2021b, p. 12). To the processes of accrual and repetition in Ryan’s work, we might add splitting and atomization—processes that generate multiplicities, enabling patterns of association and dissociation to form. This multiplicity is a significant aspect of Ryan’s practice, as the artist has emphasized: ‘It’s not that I am avoiding issues, but some of my experiences are very contradictory, so the notion that something is a binary position, isn’t my experience. That middle space is very complicated’ (Ryan 2021c). It is in this middle, relational space that care for the self and for others, with all its complex practical and ethical interdependencies, its contradictory dynamics of association and dissociation, unfolds.

4. Conclusions: Gathering Particles

Through their exploration of support and relationality, Ryan’s sculptures pose questions of care at conceptual and physical levels, and in doing so return us to the questions of care inherent in the curation of artworks touched on at the beginning of this essay. As part of the exhibition *Life Support: Forms of Care in Art and Activism*, we were able to display the large, free-standing sculpture *Particles*, created as part of Ryan’s Art House residency (Figure 9). *Particles* relates closely to the ideas of support that Ryan pursued during her time in Wakefield, sharing the concern with the pillow form that characterizes other sculptures developed through the residency. A small yellow cushion and a rectangular blue pillow with a hole in its center sit on a set of grey stainless-steel shelves, of the industrial, mass-produced, and adjustable kinds used in diverse institutional contexts, including medical establishments, for the storage of tools, utensils, and documents. As its title suggests, *Particles* uses the shelf unit to arrange seemingly disparate items and generate connections between them. Alongside the yellow and blue pillows, other objects nestled on the sculpture’s shelves include three brown felted pads, stacked one on top of the other and pierced with pins; a scrunched mass of tie-dyed material knotted in places with fluorescent hairbands; and plaster casts of organic forms suggestive of fruits, shells, or pods. Like the fragments of *Infection*, these elements never cohere into a totality, instead catalyzing—without confirming—myriad associations.

The experience of unpacking the sculpture during installation underscored the role of care in the work’s associative effects. One of the elements, generally placed on the bottom shelf of *Particles*, is a large rectangular block of plaster with a series of pointed oval indentations piercing its surface, an impression perhaps of a flimsy plastic tray used to transport soft fruits like pears or avocados. It has been transformed through the casting process from a light, ephemeral structure into a heavy, monumental slab, which requires incredibly gentle handling to maneuver it into position. By far the most anxiety-inducing objects, however, are two shallow semi-spherical plaster casts that look like they have been cast from the tissue packaging used to protect oranges or apples during transit. Their edges are thin and delicate as lace, brittle as spun sugar, and feel sickeningly like they could snap off with the slightest disturbance. Close inspection reveals the objects in *Particles* to have their own strategies of protection, like the set of slender pins that stick out from the stack of brown felt pads, and, paradoxically, their intense precarity.



Figure 9. Veronica Ryan, *Particles*, 2017, mixed media, 198 × 91.5 × 30.5 cm. Commissioned by The Hepworth Wakefield in partnership with The Art House, Wakefield, 2017. Copyright Veronica Ryan. Courtesy of Wakefield Council Permanent Art Collection (The Hepworth Wakefield). Photo credit: The Hepworth Wakefield.

The experience of displaying *Particles* highlighted the contradictory forms of care often operative at any one time within the curatorial context. As a curatorial team, we have reflected together on the ultimately unreconcilable tension between the requirements of

institutional curatorial care, particularly regarding the practical issues of lighting, temperature, and humidity levels, and our desire to present the sculpture in an accessible way within a library as opposed to a gallery, a space deliberately designed and operated as a resource for multiple individuals and groups (Figure 10) (Gausden et al. 2023). Many of the curators and scholars cited at the beginning of this essay have highlighted the danger that care in curating is employed in a tokenistic way, merely as terminology, rather than as an ethics that demands attentiveness to structural imbalances of power within institutions, including modes of display (Reckitt 2020, p. 196; Vergès 2023). These are precisely the considerations, however, that Ryan catalyzes through materials and form. Ryan's sculptures challenge a straightforward definition of curating with care as turning attention towards people rather than objects, reminding curators and viewers alike that our subjectivities and embodied experiences are often deeply cathected to objects, in ways that are important to both our internal and interpersonal lives.



Figure 10. Veronica Ryan, *Particles*, 2017, mixed media, 198 × 91.5 × 30.5 cm. Commissioned by The Hepworth Wakefield in partnership with The Art House, Wakefield, 2017. Copyright Veronica Ryan. Courtesy of Wakefield Council Permanent Art Collection (The Hepworth Wakefield). On display at Glasgow Women's Library, as part of *Life Support: Forms of Care in Art and Activism*, 2021. Photo credit: Neil Hanna.

Although Ryan's works have entered institutions and are regularly displayed in accordance with professional demands, it is also important to consider the circumstances of their making. Price vividly describes a visit to Ryan's studio residency at Spike Island as almost overwhelming in its sensory variety, a constant scene of creation in which Ryan's care and nurture for her objects was sustained, but decidedly not precious (Price 2021a, p. 24). Ryan has recounted how she often carries materials for sculptures around with her in a bag, including on transatlantic flights between the UK and the US, so that she can constantly tend to them (Ryan 2020, p. 216). The display arrangements for Ryan's work often reference this sense of continuous process and interplay, particularly in installations like *Infection* where works appear as if momentarily set down in a pleasing configuration before being picked up again—an invitation that extends, at least conceptually, to the viewer. Such choices play a crucial role in the sculptures' generation of relational affect, powerfully conveying how objects are intertwined with memories and experiences shared with other people, and as such, form allusive and elusive sites of care.

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Notes

- ¹ GWL co-founder Adele Patrick reflects: ‘The term Library was deliberately chosen in the case of GWL as, arguably, the most accessible of cultural resources. Such a library signposts a safe, free, comfortable, welcoming but challenging space, where art in all forms is made and shared. It offers a locus for chance encounters with others, where friendships are forged in a context replete with inspiring texts, sounds, and visual material (all donated and therefore collectively “curated”) and where duration and frequency of visits can be hugely varied and self-determined’ (Patrick 2021).
- ² Martha E. Giménez notes the conflicting views and feelings that abound about such types of feminized labour, due to ‘its contradictory nature and the experiences and perceptions of women in different socio-economic strata’ (Giménez 2019, p. 258).
- ³ It would be possible to take a crip theoretical approach to Ryan’s work, following Alison Kafer’s insight that, ‘the meaning of disability, like the meaning of illness, is presumed to be self-evident; we all know it when we see it. But the meaning of illness and disability are not nearly so fixed or monolithic; multiple understandings of disability exist’ (Kafer 2013, p. 16). Giulia Smith has compellingly analyzed the way in which sculptor Jesse Darling’s work might be said to manifest a form of crip aesthetics in a way that provides a suggestive correlation with some of Ryan’s works (Smith 2021).
- ⁴ Of working at Spike Island, Ryan reflected: ‘My first solo exhibition was at the Arnolfini in Bristol in 1987, and I can’t ignore the history: it’s very present. Walking along the river every day to Spike I was again reminded of Bristol’s big part in the Atlantic slave trade. I’d already been making work using tea bags and dying pillowcases with tea and then I discovered that the Spike Island building had been a tea packing factory [...] and that became a conversation in the work’ (Ryan 2021b).
- ⁵ During this period ‘Black’ was often used as a political, coalitional term by artists of African, Asian and Caribbean heritage.

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