

# Other Body Knowledge

*Contending with the  
mythic norm*

15th September – 8th October 2022

Dion Beasley, Jane Trengove,  
Lara Chamas, Ruark Lewis,  
Sam Petersen, Sophie Cassar

*Curated by Jane Trengove  
& Katie Ryan*

KINGS

*presents*

With individualism so deeply entrenched in the experience of disability, it becomes even more important to work towards collectivity in disability discourse and politics.

—Sophie Cassar, 2020.<sup>1</sup>

*Other Body Knowledge*, curated by Jane Trengove and Katie Ryan, is an exhibition that explores disability, acknowledging its innate and often overlooked generative potential and the political dimensions of disabled experience. What do we make of the title? What are “other bodies” and what knowledge do they possess? To be an othered subject—to be viewed as alien, intrinsically outside of normality and sameness—is to embody a taboo. But to be disabled is also to live in an inherently different body, a body that is atypical and therefore has a unique experience of the world. Interestingly, a slew of exhibitions concerning embodied knowledge have occupied Australian art in 2022, raising questions about corporeal experience and the stories that bodies tell.<sup>2</sup> None, however, have centred on disability, a testament to the threat it still poses even in liberal cultural spheres.

We are at a pertinent cultural moment regarding the articulation of the disabled body. In a highly bureaucratised, image based, ocular-centric technoculture, identity categories have simultaneously become highly valued and problematised. The emphasis on celebrating diversity and cultural difference is indeed productive and well-meaning, but simultaneously threatens to homogenise the experience of “othered” subjects. As theorists like Lennard J. Davis and Anna Mollow have highlighted, disability proposes a compelling counter to this climate—a challenge that undermines neat categorisation and sentimentalisation. Disability, incredibly amorphous, does not harmonise with accepted cultural articulations of identity and experience. It is defined not merely by external and social factors (discrimination and/or cultural ties), but also by possessing a unique body—by experiencing differences inherent to that body. It is this conflicted space that makes disability a compelling way of being. In *Other Body Knowledge*, the symbolic potency of disability meets a concrete politics, acknowledging the ambivalence of atypical body experience and the generative potential of disability as a way of creating and thinking beyond ableism.

Articulations of difference within culture often manifest as unique tastes, desires, or ideological beliefs which are expressed in conventional mediums or expressive archetypes. Necessitated by bodily limitations, disability has the potential to facilitate entirely different modes of making and thinking through mediums, forms, and participatory actions.

The work of Sam Petersen demonstrates this perfectly. Petersen, a queer disabled artist, combines activism with tactile and playful site-specific installation and sculpture. The latter is yucky, playful, wet, and dirty, employing mediums like plasticine, urine, spit, and cling-wrap to name a few.

*Other Body Knowledge* includes two works by Petersen: *Worm* (2022) and *Resting* (2022). The former is a video of a previous installation (2018), a droopy plasticine worm. The worm is a morally loaded motif, often signalling ugliness, deceptiveness, or manipulative behaviour—an association that has predictably been reclaimed by many artists as a subversive metaphor. But Petersen refreshingly eschews moralising and binary distinctions. Organ-like, *Worm*’s simple, floppy, snaky form evokes the messiness and malleability of the body—not in a puerile celebration of the abject, but an acknowledgment of the ambivalence of bodily experience, its horrors, joys and tensions and the uncertain distinctions between these dimensions. *Resting* (2022) features a small, round pink plasticine ball atop a strange, nodular chunk of gnarled pine wood. Forged organically by a growing tree and the intervention of the council worker who cut it down, the pine wood was found near the Altona train station. An assisted readymade, the work brings together a unique organic object and a simple shape moulded by the body with warmth and enthusiasm.

Paired with Petersen’s sculptural work is a writing practice that interrogates the unrelenting ableism Petersen endures as a wheelchair user with limited mobility and speech, and the socio-cultural difficulties faced by disabled individuals.

Atypical bodies and minds can produce unique ways of creating. Dion Beasley, a deaf Alywarr man who has muscular dystrophy, often works on the ground. He uses drawing and painting as another way to communicate the stories of the world he knows. In past work, he has drawn the dogs that frequent Tennant Creek, even creating flow charts of their movements. These have become more abstract in recent times. He also makes 3D models of Mulga Camp where he used to live, with the roads, houses and dogs all represented in his particular visual language. The scenes he conveys are intimate aerial views, offering great conceptual detail with profoundly simple, though visually arresting, iconographic or indexical signs. While Beasley’s process is informed by intuition, his nuanced perspective and symbolic language also sits comfortably within a lineage of Indigenous knowledge and painting.

Though disability is the core of *Other Body Knowledge*, the project is embedded in intersectional thinking. This exhibition includes practices with an intense focus on very personal and corporeal experience—like Petersen’s—as well as others that invoke broader concerns with the symbolic role of otherness, and how it is shaped by media and language. In a scene from Ruark Lewis’s *Euphemisms for a Riotous Suburb* (2007), a video documenting an event, Lewis drags a 2.5-metre-long beam bearing the text in block letters “Now people are scared” across the beachfront of Cronulla. The performance is rooted in the context of the 2005 Cronulla riots—an event that elicited xenophobia and racist commentary from conservative media. The text on the heavy beam relays the clichés of sensationalist headlines. Combining two often disparate forms of politically-charged art—text and performance—Lewis’s *Euphemisms for a Riotous Suburb* makes an anti-spectacle out of sensationalist rhetoric. He is seen, but he is unseen. His intervention causes little commotion. Though some beachgoers point or glance

his way, most don't see—or pretend not to see. It is a poetic commentary on language, sensationalism, and a cultural complicity that eschews acknowledgement of bodies and communities that strain under the weight of prejudice, regardless of their visibility.

Lara Chamas, a Lebanese, Australian artist, uses storytelling and documentation to reflect on historical trauma, intergenerational dialogues, tacit knowledge, and memory. Hers is a documentary-focused art practice—but one that doesn't eschew the body, personal touch and labour. Where Petersen's materials are soft and visceral, Chamas favours the solid and sharp: concrete, glass and bronze. *Other Body Knowledge* includes Chamas' video *I have Her Hands, and I have Her Pain* (2019). This intensely personal and reflective work documents a conversation between Chamas and her father in which he examines her hands and speaks about her grandmother. Among more intimate and spiritual connections, her father's description of her grandmother's illness parallels the chronic pain symptoms Chamas herself endures. Featuring a bronze cast of a hip bone and spine fragment, accompanying sculptural work *Keeping the Score* (2022) reflects on the life-long negative impact a medical intervention Chamas underwent to cope with chronic illness: after spending years and thousands of dollars on medication to manage her symptoms, Chamas discovered it had reduced her bone density.

In a competitive, neoliberal culture where efficiency is highly prized and punishing rhetoric promoting productivity and wellness abounds, to be disabled is not merely to encounter physical limitations. Rather, it is to transgress the cult of health and vitality. Sophie Cassar's *Stick and Poke* (2022) explores how disability is managed symbolically via reflection on her own experience with childhood illness. Brightly-coloured stickers are plastered over tiny, child-sized clothing—a reference to the reward system she was subjected to as a child undergoing countless medical procedures. The tiny ensemble is replete with plastic smiley faces, bunnies, flowers, and bows combined with more disquieting icons: cartoon breasts, needles, and other medical paraphernalia. They encrust the clothing like papery scales. The clothes stand stiff, as if encasing a rigid, invisible body—an unyielding little ghost of past trauma. The weight and harshness of the saccharine plastic icons stands as a material manifestation of the aggressive optimism and overzealous sentiments society calls upon to gloss over or sugar-coat the pain of disability and illness (particularly in young people). We can imagine a tiny body suffering through harsh, life-saving, but life-altering, medical intervention. A voodoo doll of medical progress, this body demonstrates and suffers the marvels of medicine and—the inverse—its limitations and the tyranny of biopolitics.

Cassar's work might also hold parallels with the sick girl aesthetic—a subsidiary of the tumblr sad girl that fits neatly into the lineage of romanticised frailty (think TB chic of the Victorian era). Combining girlie, overly feminine and infantilised symbols with adult themes, the too-muchness of the gesture and the jarring juxtaposition convey an investment in dealing with excess and objectification in our current post-internet, perpetual adolescent malaise.

Despite the investment in the aestheticisation of illness as a subversive (and indeed sometimes compelling and generative) metaphor within culture, these spectacles often sit uneasily with the real, lived experience of disability. Favouring personal exploration, Jane Trengove's practice counters this pervasive symbolism, wrenching it from muddy generalisations. In her work for *Other Body Knowledge*, Trengove considers the objects and physical aids associated with disability. These are used to manage challenges presented by the body one inhabits, challenges that are brutally compounded by rigid structures of ableism and the inaccessible architecture of the everyday. As Trengove explains, her work for *Other Body Knowledge* concerns basic physics—"EFFORT = LOAD", are the words Trengove has inscribed on photo prints of 'bricks', which are then adhered to the gallery's brick wall, a reflection on "the load weighted upon the disabled body"—a build up, not merely of physical limitations, but also "by ableist social and built environments."

In a small bright-blue monochrome photograph, paired with a wool wrapped model of her leg brace and originally exhibited in 1997, Trengove showed herself as a child, her tiny body held upright by a full-body splint. Though her binding wasn't as ornate as that of the invisible child in Cassar's similarly autobiographical *Stick and Poke*, Trengove's little body is shaped by well-intentioned external intervention. Trengove has reworked this piece for *Other Body Knowledge*, again exhibiting a model of her leg brace alongside a photograph of herself. The leg brace now stripped of soft wool is exposed as rough metal and the revised photo is an image of her grey hair. Trengove explains the work as, "a history of the disabled self, toughened through years of dogged persistence". Titled *Self-Portrait in Hard Steel* (2022), the pairing conveys the personal but ubiquitous experience of endurance—of unacknowledged labour—that often defines the disabled experience.

"My point is that illness is not metaphor", Susan Sontag explains in an opening paragraph of her iconic essay *Illness as Metaphor* (1978). "[T]he most truthful way of regarding illness", she continues, "is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking."<sup>3</sup> We should think the same of disability. *Other Body Knowledge* subverts or reimagines the troubling metaphorical applications of disability. Indeed, disabled bodies and the experiences that stem from them cannot always be easily conveyed or categorised. The resolving of these tensions is impossible and likely undesirable. The projects in *Other Body Knowledge* abstain from didacticism, approaching a malleable articulation of disability that does not collapse into a romanticised or auratic otherness, or a stigmatised, abject taboo. Instead, the exhibition presents a compelling conversation between artworks and experiences that appreciate this ambiguity without ignoring the concrete reality of disability.

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<sup>1</sup> Sophie Cassar, "The Medicalised Individual and Disabled Collectivity" Honours thesis., (Melbourne: Monash University 2020), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Examples include *Embodied Knowledge* (13 August 2022 –

12 January 2023) at the Gallery of Modern Art, Queensland, and *Agent Bodies* (8 April 2022 – 14 August 2022) at RMIT Gallery, Melbourne.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Randomhouse, 1977), 3.

*Other Body Knowledge: Contending with the mythic norm* has been initiated by disabled artist and curator Jane Trengove and KINGS Organisation Coordinator Katie Ryan in an intergenerational, disabled/non-disabled pairing. This collaborative approach extended to include consultations with a group of d/Deaf and disabled artists, allowing ideas to be formed through conversation and knowledge sharing.

This exhibition is part of a broader project that has been developed over the last twelve months and included a public program of three sessions led by d/Deaf and disabled artists: Visual Describing in Art Spaces, an online panel discussing Art and Ableism and a Deaf Culture and d/Deaf Awareness workshop.

#### Text by Tara Heffernan

Tara is a blind art historian and writer. She is currently completing a PhD (Art History) at the University of Melbourne on the work of post war Italian artist Piero Manzoni.

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