

**is that a promise or a threat?**

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## ABSTRACT

My research stems from a place of curiosity, material exploration, and intuitive play. The art I produced during my MFA is informed by my personal experiences with trauma, grief, gaslighting, and the subsequent inability to interpret my resonant feelings. The title of my thesis exhibition and accompanying support paper – *is that a promise or a threat?* – is the foundational question and entryway into deciphering the intense, overwhelming, and contradictory states of affect that I was and, to a lesser degree, still am experiencing. In response to these circumstances, my research focuses on ideas of care, fragility, transformation, dis- and re-orientation, and how clay, as a material, is a catalyst and grounding agent for embodied understanding. The content I explore is mirrored in the precarity and material flux of ceramic sculpture, fragile and vulnerable, yet crystalline. The ceramic sculptures and drawings installed in the gallery space are meant to emulate a perpetual oscillation between risk and safety, threat and promise, anxiety and satisfaction – thus mirroring the constant negotiation and exploration of my own affective experience. This paper is written to accompany my MFA thesis exhibition which will be on display April 10-14 2023, in Gales Gallery at York University.

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## INTRODUCTION

In August 2021 I left southern Alberta to attend York University. I was excited for the challenge and opportunity to develop my artistic practice. However, it was difficult leaving the place where I had spent my entire life, with its familiar blue skies and expansive prairies. Intertwined with these distinct feelings, leaving Alberta also marked the definitive end to a tumultuous nine year-long abusive relationship. After multiple efforts on my part to leave the relationship safely throughout the years – a cross-country move and change in address meant that I would no longer arrive home with “gifts” left on my doorstep or the fear that a knock on the door meant my abuser had returned. At the same time, however, moving to a new city by myself meant that I would be uprooted from my support system where all interactions would be mediated through a screen and two-hour time difference.

At the beginning of the MFA program, I was struggling with emotional dysregulation due to these overwhelmingly disorienting circumstances. Years of enduring abuse had undermined my embodied knowledge and sense of self – my ability to trust my instincts had been weathered away. My anxiety had been so finely tuned to identify threats that it was acting as a survival mechanism, perceiving threats everywhere. I consistently wondered, in part due to the enduring effects of gaslighting, if my experiences and perceptions were accurate. Could I trust myself to read a situation? How could I differentiate, or even identify, what I was feeling? How much was I being influenced by the disorienting aftermath of an abusive relationship? Or, was it possible that my experiences made me more adept at recognizing and identifying harmful patterns, behaviours, and triggers? The art I produced during my MFA is informed by these personal experiences and explores how trauma and gaslighting affect one’s ability to interpret resonant feelings (Sodoma 2022; Sweet 2019).

In response to these circumstances, my thesis exhibition and support paper focus on ideas of care, fragility, transformation, dis- and re-orientation, and how clay, as a material, is a catalyst and grounding agent for embodied understanding. My support paper outlines the strategies I used to rebuild a grounded, intuitive connection to myself and my practice. It is my aim to cultivate dialogues where transformation, absurdity, and humour are strategies that reposition narratives around grief, mental health, and trauma. In this sense, my practice is informed by Lauren Fournier's description of autotheory as a lens that blends memoir and autobiography while situating itself within larger theoretical, philosophical, and political dialogues. Fournier identifies autotheory as a long-standing intersectional feminist practice that provides, and has provided, an alternative space for perspectives that might have been overlooked, excluded, or trivialized. She writes how autotheory can pursue or process tensions where the "self" brushes up against others in varying degrees of affect – frictive, satisfying, transformational, antagonistic, empathetic (272) – emphasizing how the "singular is a gateway to the multiple" (276). Affect, in its frictive capacity, is oriented, processed, received, and passed through the body, and, consequently, is marked by the reception of individual experiences that are constantly fluctuating. Disparate readings of affect are, therefore, a result of differing perspectives. I am interested in looking at the range of affective embodied responses that are informed by trauma, disconnection, or the inscrutability of one's own emotions. Consequently, liminal space, interstices of action and inaction, and the notion of the impasse became fruitful spaces for me. If I couldn't move outside of these difficult and disorienting feelings, then I felt compelled to dwell in them. As a result, I began to examine the fertile ground of liminal space.

I found that for every grounding quality, there is an equally disorienting counterpoint and experience – reiterating the indivisible, intertwining, and oppositional nature of affect. Positive and negative affects act as foils by emphasizing and enhancing the qualities of the other. Like a

precious stone that has been backed by silver foil, it shines brighter – becomes more intense – due to an interdependent relationship. The tactics I’ve revisited throughout my research have been a means to move through my own affective experience and positionality without preemptively and unnecessarily pushing through the moments of anxiety, uncertainty, fear, and disappointment. By allowing them to be part of the process, I recognized the valuable knowledge these modes offered and how they were a necessary – and indivisible – aspect of my research. Cultural theorists Gregg and Seigworth write how the powers of affectivity/affectability may become less potent over time: “Suspend, wither, maybe die. But this split—promise or threat—is rarely so stark” (13). They recognize how the enduring, overlapping qualities of affect arrive in a near simultaneous rhythm, ebbing and flowing, where a form of relation is marked by “the passages of intensities (whether dimming or accentuating) in body-to-body/world-body mutual imbrication” (13) and, therefore, potentially evade a clear, singular experience. Blurred lines and indiscernible space reside in the in-between-ness of affect, negating the limitations of an either/or binary and, instead, rely on the expansive possibilities of both/and. Consequently, the idea of the intertwined and contrary nature of a *promise or threat* became the catalyst, footing, and title for my thesis exhibition and support paper.

## PROMISE OR A THREAT

*A large ceramic anvil hangs out of sight overtop the threshold of Gales Gallery. Unseen by those entering the space, the undeniable precarity threatens each unknowing attendant with the promise of gravity. That which rises shall eventually return to ground. Suspended, caught between falling and floating – the anvil defies gravity and is also held by it. For now, this object looms with all its dreaded weight out of sight of the viewer. It is only when the visitor turns that they see it hiding in plain sight. The realization that they passed underneath it hopefully elicits a chuckle, or a wry smile, but in order to leave they must pass underneath, now knowing the full potential impact. The ceramic anvil is a threat to itself at that height. If it were to fall, it would shatter. It holds the promise of self-destruction as well as acting as a threat for others. Further inside the gallery, several porcelain banana peels cluster together on the ground. One banana peel left on the ground is an accident, but a collection of them is a trap. This potential threat is immediately recognizable from Saturday morning cartoons, but the reality of the threat is veiled – the ceramic banana peel won't make you slip, but it will shatter underfoot.*

“Is that a promise or a threat?” The question itself is innocent enough and seemingly uncomplicated. How do you categorize an experience, statement, or feeling? Is it something to look forward to or dread? What are the underlying possibilities and how are they distinguished? How does it feel? It seems straightforward, but the more you try to unravel it, the more knotted it becomes. Even asking the question – and seeking clarification – implies that the difference between the two is not entirely clear. If something is not overtly registered as a threat, then what are the factors that make it seem less so? Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth identified this question as a key concept in affect theory in their anthology *The Affect Theory Reader*. They ask whether affect is a promise or a threat; their response is that, unsurprisingly to them, the

interpretation of affect often encompasses both promise and threat at the same time (10). Affect, according to Gregg and Seigworth, has the capacity to simultaneously exist in disparate states and, therefore, escapes simple identification.

I am interested in the suspension between multiple, contradictory feelings or states. In this way, the rich overlapping space between promise and threat is ideal for communicating the uncertainty/fluidity of visceral and embodied experiences. Gregg and Seigworth note that “affect bears an intense and thoroughly immanent neutrality” (10). In this sense, affect is neither a promise nor a threat, but, rather, a permeating neutral energy that, upon impact, is filled with personal, social, and cultural associations. The agency or inherent force of affect is rooted in individual associations with events, objects, or encounters. Affect is contradictory – its impact can be felt collectively, shared, and passed between individuals, yet it is heavily rooted in subjective interpretations that vary from person to person, even moment to moment.

Feminist philosopher Teresa Brennan’s opening sentence in her book *The Transmission of Affect* asks, “Is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and ‘felt the atmosphere’?” (1). How is the atmosphere of a room affected when you walk underneath a suspended anvil? Does the threat unnerve the unsuspecting visitor? Or does it provide a thrill? Picking up on an atmosphere – or feeling – is determined by our “angle of arrival”, which is always felt from a specific point comprising multiple intersecting angles of interpretation (Ahmed, *Happy Objects* 37). Brennan recognizes how one feels in relation to others – the transmission of affect – must be considered from both social and psychological perspectives. In many ways, affect can be considered to be a catalyst for reaction, interpretation, contemplation, deterioration – with the *potential* to provoke a wide range of singular experiences. Affect has extensive qualities – existing within an immeasurable expanse – which are noted in the Introduction of *The Affect Theory Reader*:

as excess, as autonomous, as impersonal, as the ineffable, as the ongoingness of process, as pedagogico-aesthetic, as virtual, as shareable (mimetic), as sticky, as collective, as contingency, as threshold or conversion point, as immanence of potential (futurity), as the open, as a vibrant incoherence that circulates about zones of cliché and convention, as a gathering place of accumulative dispositions. (9)

The associated characteristics are as open and wide-ranging as the sensation and interpretation of affect itself – resonant, but evasive.

## AFFECTIVE WEATHER



Fig. 1, *affective weather*, video, 17:12 min, looped, no sound, 2022

Affect has the capacity to pass briefly or stick around. It is simultaneously temporal and atemporal. In the same way that enduring a depressive episode or anxiety attack is deeply embedded in the body but, in some ways, exists outside of reality, prompting the question: “will

this feeling pass?” This sign, pictured above, hangs in the window of my studio – the negative space of letters is filled by a constantly shifting view (fig.1). Clouds pass through the sky in the same way affect moves through the body. The movement demonstrates how changes can be imperceptible or drastic, echoing the range and influence affect has on a body or environment. Bad weather – similar to grief, trauma, or other lingering affects – can stick around for days. Teresa Brennan writes about how the experience of affect influences our interpretive capacity and can even impact our physical experience – “the transmission [of affect] is also responsible for bodily changes; some are brief changes, as in a whiff of the room's atmosphere, some longer lasting” (1).

Over the course of several days I used my camera to record the passing weather while I worked in the studio. The culmination is a time-lapse video that captures weather systems over several non-consecutive days framed by the stark black sign and cut-out letters. The video has a slight increase in speed to highlight the weather patterns so that the changes are easier to register. Artist and author Jenny Odell writes in her book *Inhabiting the Negative Space* about her impulse to set up a tripod and take photos from her office window as an experiment in noticing, recording the changes in light and subtle shifts in her daily life over the course of a month (38). In many ways our ability to read the signs of changing weather mirrors how we identify affect in our bodies. The threat of far-away storm clouds is followed by considerations about the direction that the wind is blowing, how much time it will take to get home, and whether or not you're prepared to endure the storm. Clouds can be used as a metaphor for thoughts or feelings: see them, identify them, but let them pass. The idea of looking and noticing, without getting swept away, is one of the basic tenets of mindfulness training. The ability to sustain a prolonged curiosity about the encounters and reactions within your body is to watch for growth, transformation, pain, pleasure, dissonance. As we become finely tuned to affective weather we

become more familiar with our interior world. But what happens when affect is sticky, dense, obstinate – as it so often is? (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*). What happens when the weather lingers? When you're stuck, weighed down, caught at an impasse?

## IMPASSE

If an impasse is a roadblock what does it accomplish other than to interrupt “progress?” What does holding still offer? In *Cruel Optimism*, cultural theorist Lauren Berlant presents the idea of an impasse as a delay, a pause in overt action, locked in a forever relay of possibility, but distinct from stasis. She writes:

An impasse is a holding station that doesn't hold but opens out into anxiety, that dog-paddling around a space whose contours remain obscure. An impasse is decompositional – in the unbound temporality of the lag one hopes to have been experiencing all along (otherwise it's the end), it marks a delay. (199)

For Berlant, an impasse expands out into anxiety which is open-ended, unbound by time and therefore ongoing. The act of holding still isn't empty, it is filled with possibility and threat. Anxiety functions similarly, as a boundless repetitive cycle that explores potential fears entwined with the spaciousness of an impasse. What interrupts the unending, unbound, unravelling experience of anxiety? Anxiety, which is a sister to fear, can perpetuate itself ad infinitum, even ad nauseam – it is cumulative and prolonged.

Philosopher and social theorist Brian Massumi maintains that threats are future-oriented. He argues that a threat is self-sustaining in that the threat does not have to actualize in order to command action – the threat is held in the potential, the possibility of actualization. Massumi writes, “The future of the threat is not falsified. It is deferred. The case remains forever open.

The futurity doesn't stay in the past where its feeling emerged. It feeds forward through time. It runs an endless loop forward from its point of emergence" (54). Massumi's identification of the endless enduring expanse of a threat captures the experience of anxiety. However, potential is a vacuum that we shape in accordance with our "angle of arrival" – much in the same way that affect is shaped by projected associations. An impasse opens out into latent potential which can manifest as threat or opportunity. Both are viable. Both are transformational, just in different ways. The power of the impasse is that it holds space for multiple things to be true simultaneously. The impasse develops a feeling of suspension, tension, or gravity – an undercurrent of latent possibility with an undetermined result. This indeterminacy – which allows the viewer to project possibility, anxieties, or affect onto an object or encounter – prolongs a definitive, and therefore fixed, experience.

In that sense, I align with feminist theorist Ann Cvetkovich's understanding of impasse which she writes about in her book *Depression: a public feeling*. Cvetkovich identifies *the impasse* as "a state of both stuckness and potential, maintaining a hopefulness about the possibility that slowing down or not moving forward might not be a sign of failure and might instead be worth exploring" (21). Throughout the book, Cvetkovich recognizes how depression, anxiety, and inertia are types of blockages that present new opportunities for understanding, and how this type of knowledge can help us reconfigure an impasse as a state with productive potential (23). The book investigates the opportunities and productive possibilities of depression, without negating the reality, severity, and impact of mood disorders. Mental health issues and depression can be useful lenses to view and critique social structures or systemic violence but "recovery" isn't the solution. Author and activist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha talks about how recovery is heavily rooted in ableist ideas, where able-bodies are the ultimate goal and the "cure" (103). Instead of putting depression to "good use," Cvetkovich advocates that, "it

might instead be important to let depression linger, to explore the feeling of remaining or resting in sadness without insisting that it be transformed or reconceived” (14). Cvetkovich describes her process to identify and become “unstuck” and move through her depression by recognizing and valuing the embedded bodily knowledge within experiences of anxiety, inertia, and despair. In a similar vein, I recognized that in order to become unstuck I needed to move through my feelings of inertia, imposter syndrome, and grief by allowing them to take up space. I began by taking those feelings out of a psychological space and articulating them into material, drawing, and writing.

## **DISORIENTATION//REORIENTATION**

The disorientation that I was feeling was, in large part, due to my inability to untangle the feelings of intuition and trauma-induced anxiety – was I dealing with promises or threats? I started thinking about wayfinding, orientation, and recalibration as guides to help reintegrate grounded intuitive knowledge into my practice. In the previous section, I write about sustained observation and prolonged curiosity as a way to recognize the interior depths of the body. This somatic exploration gently examines the feelings held within the body – recognizing where things are sticky, tight, expansive, clotted – and allowing them to take up the space they need. The more my body recalibrated, the better I would be at identifying external triggers, influences, and blockages.

I have always been interested in dowsing. Dowsing is a form of divination that uses a bent rod or instrument to locate concealed resources; water, minerals, metals. A practitioner, or dowser, is meant to concentrate on finding a specific resource, locating it through the subtle jerks

and movements of a divination rod (Naylor). Similarly, I use *bodily dowsing* as a metaphor for finding and locating feelings held in the body, which reorients oneself with somatic knowledge. I wanted to mine the emotional resources of my body. Where is grief felt, stored, and carried? How does the weight of depression hinder the flow of ideas? I could already locate the bright buzzing of anxiety swirling and spiraling from my skull down the spine, burrowing into the pit of my stomach – unrelenting and consuming. Reorientation looked like locating the nets, pathways, chasms, and densely knotted sites in my body and giving them space to dislodge or coax themselves into more malleable shapes.

In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Sara Ahmed writes about how turning towards certain objects – *orientation* – results in our bodies taking shape in accordance to those objects. In what ways had my body taken shape after enduring years of disregard, activation, and harm? What type of healing would be possible if I was no longer in those situations and could reorient my body? Would it encourage a transformation? Ahmed identifies how a queer phenomenology starts by redirecting our attention toward different objects or outcomes that deviate or are deviant from social norms, largely in response to deep heteronormative conditioning (*Queer* 3). In this way, queer phenomenology allows room for orientation, re-orientation, deviation, and discovery. Therefore, being curious and getting lost become essential parts of the process. Bodily dowsing, or deep probing, uncovers and integrates somatic knowledge into the body. Instead of following a straight path – determined by social norms or conventions – the gravitational pull of deviant objects or ideologies queer or *kink up* what might have been a direct path. I'm interested in what catches people's attention and which objects engender sympathy, interest, and care in such a profound way that individuals are then compelled to change trajectory towards those objects. In response to the ideas of recovery,

healing, moving forward, moving through, recalibration, reorientation – I started working on a series of drawings (fig. 2).

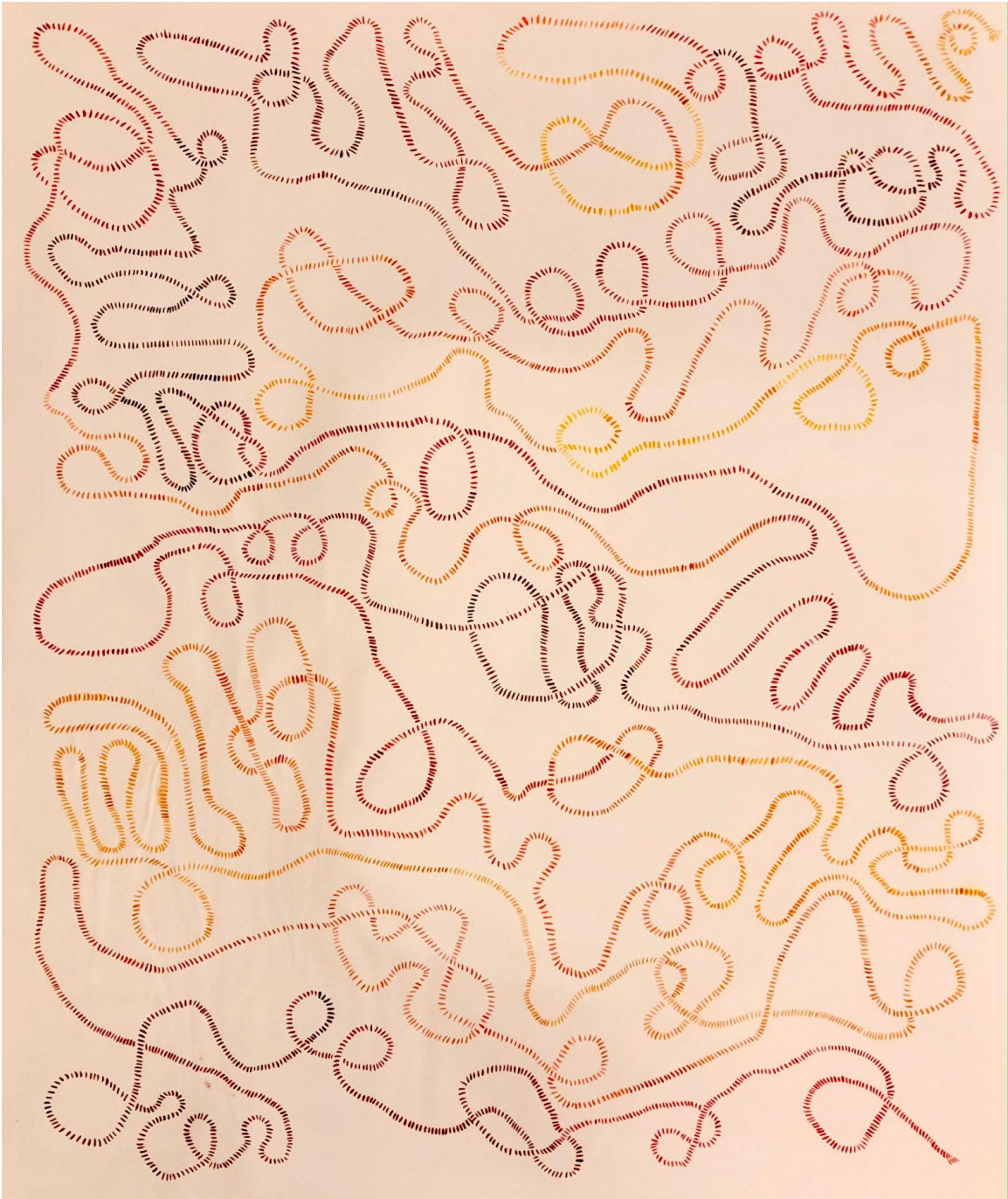


Fig. 2, *a spiral is just a knot with a twist*, watercolour on paper, 19.5" x 25.5", 2022

The drawings follow a straightforward format. A single rope made up of tiny ticks travels along the page in twists, curves, pretzel knots. The changes in direction or colour are intuitive and can be subtle or abrupt. With each tick, the drawings mark the passing of time following along in sequence. Each line is a slow determined step that might backtrack, but always moves determinedly onward. The path of the rope is a recalibration practice for me, but it also echoes what the path of recovery might look like. Healing isn't linear. It's two steps forward and one step back, it's countless bad days for every good one, it's hard work and a long negotiation. However, it can be cathartic to sift through knotted feelings and track the differences in intensity. When I approach a blank piece of paper, it can feel daunting. Each tiny mark feels inconsequential in relation to the size of the page. Mark by mark, line by line, I slowly make my way around the white space. I take my time, I find my way, I slowly remember what it feels like to be a conduit for impulses; simultaneously lost in the process and secure in the body. When I look at the picture as a whole I can see the slow and steady progress of each step. I spend an equal amount of time without making any progress on the drawings at all. The path is inefficient, it kinks and curls, but it feels honest and seductive. Looking at the works from a distance grants a sense of perspective that is also essential in understanding recovery. I am constantly looking for markers in my life: markers of change, growth, clarity, comfort. Examination, as a tool, catches something and holds it still, but, in contrast, the flow of emotion provides a way to *feel* your way through.

Sara Ahmed writes that “the focus on attachments is crucial to queer and feminist politics – *like bodily attachments in the form of feelings* – is itself a sign that transformation is not about transcendence” (*Cultural Politics* 16; emphasis added). In my own recovery, I held onto the idea

that “getting better” meant not feeling anything, never being triggered, and being immune to the ebbs and flows of overwhelming affect. The density of traumatic events weighed down my body and the intense discomfort of grief and sadness were insurmountable barriers. I was attached to those feelings because they happened to my body, in my body. I needed to develop new ways and methods that allowed things to flow through, and encouraged space for joy and play. I didn’t need to transcend negative affect, I needed to reconcile with it and develop a stronger compass to find my way through. Philosopher Brian Massumi emphasizes that “approaches to affect would feel a great deal less like a free fall if our most familiar modes of inquiry had *begun with movement rather than stasis, with process always underway rather than position taken*” (Gregg and Seigworth 4; emphasis added). In alignment with Massumi’s sentiment, I approach my practice as a process that is constantly moving, responding, and shifting as a way to imbed affective understanding within the material and out towards the viewer.

## **SPIRAL TIME//SNAIL TIME**

The spiral, like the impasse, holds multiple contradictions. A *downward spiral* is an inability to break the momentum of compounding affect – it is unsustainable. This devolution holds the promise of eventual collapse. That being said, the spiral rotates both ways – inwards and outwards. A ceramic wheel is a site where the spiral is enacted in its duality, using rotational force to open and compress a body of clay. Pushing and pulling, expanding and contracting. A spiral reminds me of recovery because it allows space for deterioration and construction to exist simultaneously. Each rotation yields movement. Unhealthy patterns often illicit the image of a closed circle that is doomed to repeat forever. The circle is contained, but the spiral is unbound.

When we consider the spiral, each rotation grants distance from the initial event. The spiral offers an expanded view of the past, where you are no longer bound – or caught – in the direct experience of past trauma. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha discusses how recovery and remembering provide a wealth of knowledge that challenges the notion that individuals must be “cured” in order to thrive. She writes:

Traditional ideas of survivorhood think of "remembering" as a time-limited process that happens upon recovery of abuse memories and then is over. But in another survivor universe, we are continually expanding – we are always remembering, and remembering again, and thinking about what our wounding means. We are mining our survivor experiences for knowledge. (234)

Piepzna-Samarasinha highlights the expansive capacity of remembering. But, like the spiral, memory can behave in multiple ways. It can be as claustrophobic as the initial event, or it can arrive and pass without so much as a ripple. There is profound knowledge in remembering, reorienting, and expanding into recovery. Cycles are contradictory, both fixed and evolving: lodged in memories, familiar patterns, and bad habits, while also being tied to the present – steadily moving towards future possibilities. The spiral offers perspective. Clinical psychologist M. Katherine Hudgins describes the therapeutic spiral as a visual image that helps reconcile “active experiencing of trauma bubbles and the narrative labeling needed to complete cognitive processing” (41). She asserts that spiral visualization helps PTSD survivors articulate their emotional state and offers them an alternative perception that interrupts what might become a compounding episode. It is worth noting that spiral imagery has been incorporated into many cultures, and is pervasive in therapeutic applications and narratives (40).



Fig. 3, *pinkie promise*, mid-fire porcelain, 4" x 2" x 15", 2022

A spiral starts with a single 360 degree turn, returning to center seemingly unchanged. It only takes a small effort to alter the course, knocking the trajectory off its axis, and throwing it from a closed circle to a loop. However, it marks the beginning of change – invariably altering a straight path. My piece *pinkie promise* (fig.3) stands upright with a small 360-degree loop in the pinkie. As the finger slowly stretches into the air it shifts from light blue to slime green. After travelling through the small loop-de-loop, does the intention of the promise hold? Or does the

shift in colour indicate a change of heart? The elongated pinkie is fragile, like a promise. Once a promise is made, there is always the threat that it will be broken.

The spiral has been cropping up in my life in many ways. In some instances, it is obvious, like throwing clay on the ceramic wheel or slowly adding to forms using coil building. Other times it is subtle, but equally pervasive. In Lethbridge, Alberta, it is nearly impossible to find snails in the desert climate, but the humid, wet, weather of southern Ontario is ideal for them. When I first saw the smooth spiral shell of a slow-moving snail on the wet pavement it felt like a gift and reminder. One of my favourite novels is Elisabeth Tova Bailey's *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*. In it, a woman is bed-ridden as she slowly recovers from a debilitating disease. The book captures the experience of recovery in "crip time," a concept that acknowledges how recovery and disability occupy a temporal mode in direct contrast to the pace set by ableist notions of capitalist productivity (Hedva; Kafer). It encourages individuals to move at a sustainable pace governed by the wisdom of their own bodies. In the novel, a common woodland snail is accidentally carried in on a gift of flowers and its presence and slowness echoes the protagonist's own recovery. The main character endures agonizing boredom and loneliness, in large part due to her careful and close observations of the snail. The relationship between the woman and the snail offers an opportunity for a slow transformational encounter. As the two characters move through time in similar ways, the author is able to endure her illness through curiosity and care. This has been a necessary reminder, especially since I was diagnosed with De Quervain tenosynovitis in both my hands in early October, 2022. De Quervain's is a type of tendonitis caused by repetitive strain that affects the tendon from the thumb all the way up to the elbow. The pain in my hands made lifting, holding, and carrying difficult, let alone the fine motor skills required for hand building, drawing, or writing. It is not lost on me that as I was

pushing the material limits of clay I failed to recognize the limits of my body and, in doing so, I pushed too far.

Bailey's book opened me up to the understanding of recovery as a slow process that could be enhanced by intimacy – intimacy to the body, to others, to relationships, to material. In honour of my own healing – physical, mental, emotional – I have cast several snail shells in bronze and formed others in porcelain. The bronze shells sit amongst my growing collection of abandoned shells, glass figures, and ceramic snails as a symbol of slow-time, healing, and curiosity. The scale of the shells in relation to the other pieces in the gallery can potentially go unnoticed, not unlike the small intimate acts toward recovery. But the materials – bronze, porcelain, glass – hold their weight and help to convey their historic roles as signs of status, refinement, preciousness. These tiny shells in all their forms act as talismans of the expanding potential of spiral energy and small, but sustained, efforts.



Fig. 4, *bronze snail shells (in progress)*, bronze, 2022



Fig. 5, *porcelain snail shell (in progress)*, porcelain, 2022

## CLAY//BODIES//TOUCHING

I was unable to make work during the first semester of the MFA program. This was ironic, because working in the studio has always provided me with stability and relief. However, the new environment only redoubled my feelings of inadequacy. The catalyst to return to clay came in the form of an early birthday present from a dear friend. She knew I had been struggling with the disorienting experience of moving to a new city and navigating my feelings of imposter syndrome. A month before my birthday she mailed me a copy of *Centering: In Pottery, Poetry, and the Person*. In this book, American poet, potter, and author M. C. Richards goes into detail about the grounding nature of ceramics, writing, and the body. The book was first published in 1964, republished in 1989, and has found revitalized interest in recent years with contemporary ceramic practices. The renewed popularity of ceramics speaks to its inherently unpretentious nature, satisfying tactility, and direct exchange between material and maker – all of which Richards addresses. This book felt like permission to return to the pleasure of intuitive making that is fundamental to my art practice and relationship with clay. In many ways I am pursuing what M.C. Richards identifies as:

an intensity and experience of surrender that lives in our bodies, our hands, our materials – something that does not overcome material but works in concert with them and facilitates intuitive impulses that *disclose ourselves to ourselves and to others through the process*. (12; emphasis added)

In order to work in concert with material, a level of intimacy is required. Clay has a lot of character – it has an embedded working memory, it asks for what it needs (more water, more time), and although it is malleable it is also stubbornly assertive. I have been working with clay

and ceramics for over eight years and I am constantly learning and deepening my relationship with it. Richards describes the alluring nature of clay:

You can do very many things with it, push this way and pull that, squeeze and roll and attach and pinch and hollow and pile. But you can't do everything with it. You can go only so far, and then the clay resists. To know ourselves by our resistances. (19)

To know something by our resistance to it – and by its resistance to us – is another facet of attunement and affect.



Fig. 6, *image of a slab of raw clay growing mold (studio shot), 2022*

Throughout the book, Richards draws parallels between the act of centering on the wheel with the larger act of grounding oneself mentally. Although I don't work on the wheel very often, I subscribe to the sentiment that you need a steady hand and steady mind to work with clay. It is easy to throw a responsive material, like clay, out of alignment, especially when it's moving at high speed on a wheel. Potters become so attuned to the subtle shifts of material between knuckles and fingers that they are able to throw in the dark, navigating the clay form by touch. Misalignment, in the form of a wandering mind or underlying discontent, is hard to work through. I have – on many occasions, including throughout this program – gone into the studio angry, unsettled, sleep-deprived, irritated and come away with broken pieces as a result. But it is important to note that you can recalibrate and process difficult emotions by working with clay. For me, working with clay is rooted in curiosity about what I can learn about myself and the material as we work together. Richards talks about how writing or working with clay creates the opportunity for disclosure. Maintaining and returning to a dedicated practice reveals ourselves to ourselves, and that understanding is crucial in disclosing ourselves to others.

Self-discovery, intimacy, and communication can all be bolstered through this direct connection to bodily knowledge and learning. The somatic, bodily qualities of clay are vital. Writer and activist adrienne maree brown describes somatics as:

a path, a methodology, a change theory, by which we can embody transformation individually and collectively. Somatics pragmatically supports our values and actions becoming aligned. It works through the body, engaging us in our thinking, emotions, commitments, vision and action. (17)

Clay is a material mode that translates intuitive understanding into physical form and gesture. Information is passed from one body to another – from flesh body to clay body – as they resist, assert, submit, and collaborate with each other. Non-verbal impulses are directly transferred into

the wet surface, bypassing language and embedding themselves concretely in clay through direct acts. Teresa Brennan writes how language releases us from experiencing overwhelming affect and how presently, “we only have a rudimentary language for connecting sensations, affects, and words, for connecting bodily processes and the conceptual understanding of them.” She continues to say, “The development of that language requires an attention to the pathways of sensation in the body” (140;153). If language releases us from affect, then what happens if we bypass verbal language? Perhaps affect is best carried through a visceral material like clay where there is as little mediation as possible. An affective impulse can thereby be matched and marked in material by the actualization of a single or prolonged gesture. Instead of a loss of affect, affect is imprinted, embedded, carried.

Richards speaks of a generative dialogue that stems from touch – touch that is a result of deep listening. Listening to the clay, listening to impulses as they present themselves, listening to the deep rumblings of embedded affect. Richards talks about the deep relationship of touch:

It is this speech between the hand and the clay that makes me think of dialogue. And it is a language far more interesting than the spoken vocabulary which tries to describe it, for it is spoken not by the tongue and lips but by the whole body, by the whole person, speaking and listening. (9)

Attunement, deep listening, and intuition are required to mitigate the density of embodied affect. In Jenny Odell’s book *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, she paraphrases Franco Berardi’s distinction between connectivity and sensitivity. Odell suggests that, “sensitivity involves a difficult, awkward, ambiguous encounter between two differently shaped bodies that are themselves ambiguous... [and that] *due to the effort of sensing, the two entities might come away from the encounter a bit differently than they went in*” (23-24; emphasis added). Clay is malleable – initially arriving in the shape of large blocks awaiting to be

transformed. As I shape the clay, it travels farther and farther from its initial form. In the same way, I am hoping that the embedded affect of the work is sensed by viewers who are likewise shaped and changed by their encounter. I also hope that the material transformation and malleability might prompt a reciprocal transformation in myself, releasing me from an impasse or burden of affect.

Ceramic artist Heidi Lau talks about how in her practice she learns from the clay by allowing it to reveal itself to her and listening to what it tells. Lau asserts that there is nothing else to do other than submit to this “cruel mistress,” continuing to say how, “It really feels like I am the medium, something passes through me or my hands, directed by the clay. Instead of me sculpting it, it is sculpting me back. It is a conduit for spirits” (Lau). The two differently shaped bodies that are themselves ambiguous – my fleshy body and the raw clay body – are porous, undefined, hold weight, are easily affected and altered, fragile yet strong, and present. Both have the capacity to come away altered, a transformation through touch.

Touch is integral to my work. It can be interpreted as a physical act – moving, pinching, and shaping clay – and an emotional response – as identified in the phrase “to be touched” or “to find something touching”. In Karen Barad’s 2012 article “On Touching – The Inhuman That Therefore I Am,” they explore how the act of touch is a vehicle that reveals, and connects, the self within the other and vice versa. Barad describes:

When two hands touch, there is a sensuality of the flesh, an exchange of warmth, a feeling of pressure, of presence, a proximity of otherness that brings the other nearly as close as oneself. Perhaps closer. [...] *So much happens in a touch: an infinity of others – other beings, other spaces, other times – are aroused.* (206; emphasis added)

The potential inherent in raw material is not exclusive to clay – but I think there is something incredible about shaping something directly with your hands and witnessing the impact of

material shifts. Through the nature of a material like clay, that holds the memory of each embedded mark, one can actualize resilient imagined futures. The history of each dent, print, hollow, mark is revealed on the skin-like surface and transmits outward. Gregg and Seigworth write about the mark of affect on bodies. The accumulation of affect marks the body:

becoming a palimpsest of force-encounters traversing the ebbs and swells of intensities that pass between ‘bodies.’ Bodies defined not by an outer skin-envelope or other surface boundary but *by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect* (2; emphasis added).

Like the bodies that Gregg and Seigworth describe, my sculptures have the potential to transmit affect. They have been shaped by my hand and – in turn – hold, transmit, and impact the viewer.

## **KILN: ORDEAL BY FIRE, NECESSITY OF GRIEF**

Trial by fire. The moment of truth. Sleepless nights of waiting and anxiety, dreaming up every terrible possibility while I wait for the moment to crack open the kiln doors. This is what the kiln offers me. Once those doors close and I lose sight of the pieces – reality seems to shift. The material that seems so solid, I imagine bending, collapsing, cracking, exploding, even walking across the shelves. I imagine a wealth of possibilities – good and bad. The pieces that I’ve worked on for weeks, carefully letting dry in just the right way or hand glazing small details, are subjected to intense prolonged heat. They are locked in that small space and I am locked out of it, unable to see their progress. The pronounced shift from brittle clay to crystalline structure, to gilded, glass-like surface elucidates the transformation. The ability to undergo intense circumstances of stress, pressure, and to come out the other side speaks of resilience. The kiln

promises a change, the exact parameters of which are left unknown to me until I can lay my eyes on the clay forms again. Sometimes I am met with broken pieces and sometimes something entirely unexpected.

After the doors are sealed shut and the firing schedule has started, I am caught between preemptive grief, overwhelming anxiety, and reluctant resignation. I'm overcome with the impulse to throw open the doors, rearrange the pieces for a fifth time, double check the bottoms for glaze, and eliminate all potential variables for failure. I have to physically leave the studio and York campus once the firing is underway because the compulsion to intervene is so strong. As I wrestle with the liminal space of Schrödinger's kiln I have very little faith that I've done enough to ensure the survival of the pieces. Trust is an essential aspect to this transformational act but my ability to trust myself is brittle. Firing is vital to ceramics in that it is a necessary step in the process, but also because it imbues energy and life into the pieces. Clay, when it's bone dry, is brittle and extremely fragile, but after undergoing quartz inversion, its structure is transformed. In this way, I rely on the material to visually convey its inherent qualities by reiterating a sense of vulnerability, resilience, and precarity in the finished objects. The content I explore is mirrored in the precarity and material flux of ceramic sculpture, fragile and vulnerable, yet crystalline. I think it is useful to quote Richards at length here:

I think it is structural, this *necessity of ordeal by fire*. The physics of transformation requires it. For structural changes in the moral form of a person are alchemical changes, producing alterations in pulse, breathing, and circulation. They are bodily changes, and nowhere may we experience so absolutely the oneness of the world as in these alterations of body-consciousness wrought permanently by inner growth. Symptoms of growth may look like breakdown or derangement. (132-133; emphasis added)

Richards identifies multiple sentiments that resonate with me: the necessity of transformation, the discomfort of growth, and how easily recovery might resemble a breakdown – or perhaps how a breakdown might result in unintentional/uncontrolled metamorphosis. She touches on how anxiety clouds the ability to create and explore and make mistakes, both in and outside of an art practice. I have always been interested in the capacity that negative affect holds as a catalyst.

The outcome of each firing must be reconciled with. The shifts and changes that happen in the kiln – some physical, some alchemical – cannot always be accurately predicted. There is always the potential for things to shift in the fire. As with any skill, a level of proficiency helps predict the outcome but the element of chance is never avoided entirely. I spent the majority of the summer wrestling with the kiln and working to slowly eliminate variables that might affect the outcome of the firing: the clay, the glaze, the firing schedule, the placement in the kiln, the ventilation. I am slowly learning that anxiously imagining every outcome does not prevent them. Preparing for the worst, by replaying each possibility over and over, is merely an illusion of control. The kiln offers me endless hours of grief, only to open the doors and find things in the same place I left them, but fundamentally altered.

The piece pictured below is titled *bent over backwards//bend and not break* (fig. 7). The photo on the left shows the ladder in its greenware, or unfired, stage: railroad straight, rungs running parallel to one another. However, the intense heat from the kiln, combined with the delicacy of the ladder, resulted in a distortion of the structure. Initially, the results were devastating. It was a near miracle that the ladder bent, dried, and was loaded into the kiln without breakage, only for it to emerge slumped. It felt like a complete waste of effort. Then, in a moment of curiosity, I placed the ladder on a shelf and cinder block in my studio where, to my amazement, it stood.



Fig. 7, *bent over backwards//bend and not break*, mid-fire porcelain, 15.5"x3.5"x32", 2022

Suddenly, the additional curves and interior folding made the piece seem even more precarious and, in that, more unbelievable that it was upright of its own volition. The transformation of this piece is something I could not – and did not – achieve on my own. Maybe the internal structure was begging to turn inward, maybe the kiln temperature got too hot, maybe the clay knew better than me. The excitement lies in not knowing exactly how it happened. The piece is a result of various undeterminable factors – it is one-of-a-kind. The same ladder could be fired under the same circumstances and come out entirely differently. Firing the kiln is alchemical, and the grief I experience while waiting for the kiln is equally transformational – painful and metamorphic, requiring compromise and time. The ineffable qualities that are imbued in every piece that pass through the kiln exemplify the necessary ordeal of fire and grief.



Fig. 8, *diving board finger*, mid-fire porcelain, 4.5"x24"x2.5", 2022

## HANDS STRETCHED WITHIN AN INCH OF THE KILN

Hands hold, shape, pinch, touch, carry, point, reach out – they symbolize connection. We hold hands, we make pinkie promises, we reach out to be comforted or held. With palms up, hands can indicate resignation, uncertainty, defenselessness, or the willingness to carry a burden. But hands can also do harm. Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty described embodied experiences as “knowledge in the hands” (144). I wonder, what do my hands know? What have I come to know by experiencing the world through my hands? The intelligence of my hands feels the subtleties of the material, slowly bringing imagined forms into reality.

A deep cobalt blue glaze covers the palm and fingers of a porcelain hand, the back of which is unglazed with the texture of stone – the hand is upright. The glass-like surface reflects the ambient light that simultaneously reveals and hides its melancholic colour and subtle shifts. The index finger extends and travels into the air, surpassing the other fingers by another foot and a half. Then in an abrupt change to the straight digit, the index finger bends forward like a diving board. The small ledge is high enough that it meets the viewers’ gaze or extends over their heads. Is the finger pointing at something or providing a miniscule porcelain platform? Depending on the circumstances the pointed index finger can be informational (that one), directional (over there), or confrontational (it was them!). This piece titled *diving board finger* (fig. 8), challenges material and gravity. Fragility, in this instance, threatens the survival of the piece – a sudden shift could break it. Every second the elongated finger remains intact, it defies its fragility, but does not negate it. The threat is anticipatory. The possibilities are bristling with electricity – existing in a realm of imagined destruction. Is this ambiguous gesture, bending at the knuckle and pointing outward, a sheepish accusation, or, as the title suggests, a diving board offering a platform to leap from?



Fig. 9, *bubble gum band-aid*, mid-fire porcelain, sour blue raspberry bubble gum, 4"x24"x2.5", 2022

The series of hands are all variations with different extended digits. *blue bubble gum band-aid* is proof of the fragility of ceramics (fig. 9). I made a concerted effort to ensure that all the elongated fingers survived each firing, but, despite my efforts several pieces broke. This long snaking finger snapped in two as I was moving the piece to the kiln for its first firing. Instead of mending the greenware piece, I resolved to fire it as it was. *blue bubble gum band-aid* reveals these hidden efforts by highlighting my failure and repositioning it as valid. I am committed to

failure in that it is, as theorist J. Jack Halberstam writes, an approach and relation to knowledge that offers access to alternative possibilities through methods that unravel outdated modes of “success” (23). The break of the finger is “mended” using bubble gum and a faint smell of sour blue raspberry still lingers. The fix is crude and juvenile. Instead of hiding the broken seam the bright blue gum highlights the fracture. The attempt to repair a ceramic piece using a non-functioning and ephemeral material like gum is laughable. Over time, the gum will dissolve and decay while the ceramic finger endures but splits anew.

## **INFINITY LADDER: THE PROMISE OF CLAY**

Unfired clay holds potential. At the greenware stage, it is water soluble and can be reconstituted and reused. The majority of the pieces in my thesis exhibition have followed the standard progression: wet clay, greenware, bisque, glaze. My favourite stage is when the clay is bone-dry because it can be submerged into water and reformed. The tactile surface of dry clay is velvet soft to touch – it feels alive. Richards identifies ceramics in terms of potency and potentiality where it has “power present and power latent, that can but has not yet come into being” (6). Richards recognizes that potential is held inherently within the material, potential for transformation, for renewal. Raw clay holds this power; it can be formed and reformed, with endless opportunities. The malleable quality of clay speaks to relationships and what Barad describes in an interview with Malou Juelskjaer as, “specific ongoing reconfigurings of the world in its iterative intra-activity.” They continue, “These ideas are not outside or inside me, they are threaded through ‘me’ and ‘me’ through them, or rather we are threaded through one another” (Juelskjaer 23). The materiality of clay and its inherently malleable nature echoes the

realities of ongoing reconfigurings and relationships of the world, through the body and into the body.

Throughout the duration of my thesis exhibition, I will build a life-sized clay ladder. Over the course of the week the clay will dry and shift in colour from dark grey to bone white. As the material lightens, the fragility of the piece increases. The weight of the material will cause the ladder to slump into the corner between wall and floor, rendering it even more absurd as a usable object. Although the scale of the ladder might indicate a functional relationship, an unfired clay ladder could never be climbed as the weight from each step would immediately break the rungs. The ladder will exist in the gallery space in its most fragile state, threatening to collapse or crumble at any moment. But, as it is raw clay, there is a promise of continual renewal. Next to the ladder sits a large bucket of water. At the end of the week, the ladder will be disassembled and all the broken pieces will be collected, reunited, and re-submerged into the awaiting bucket. I will use the material collected in the bucket to continually recreate this piece in other sites, a Sisyphean task. This piece is called *infinity ladder*. The persistent labour and repeated use of the same bucket-bound material embodies endurance and transformation. Ladders exist in liminal space – they are conduits from one space to another – and *infinity ladder* is no different. It rises, it falls, it's built up, it's torn down, it's finite, it's endless, it's a promise and a threat.

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## APPENDIX: MFA THESIS DOCUMENTATION - *is that a promise or a threat?*

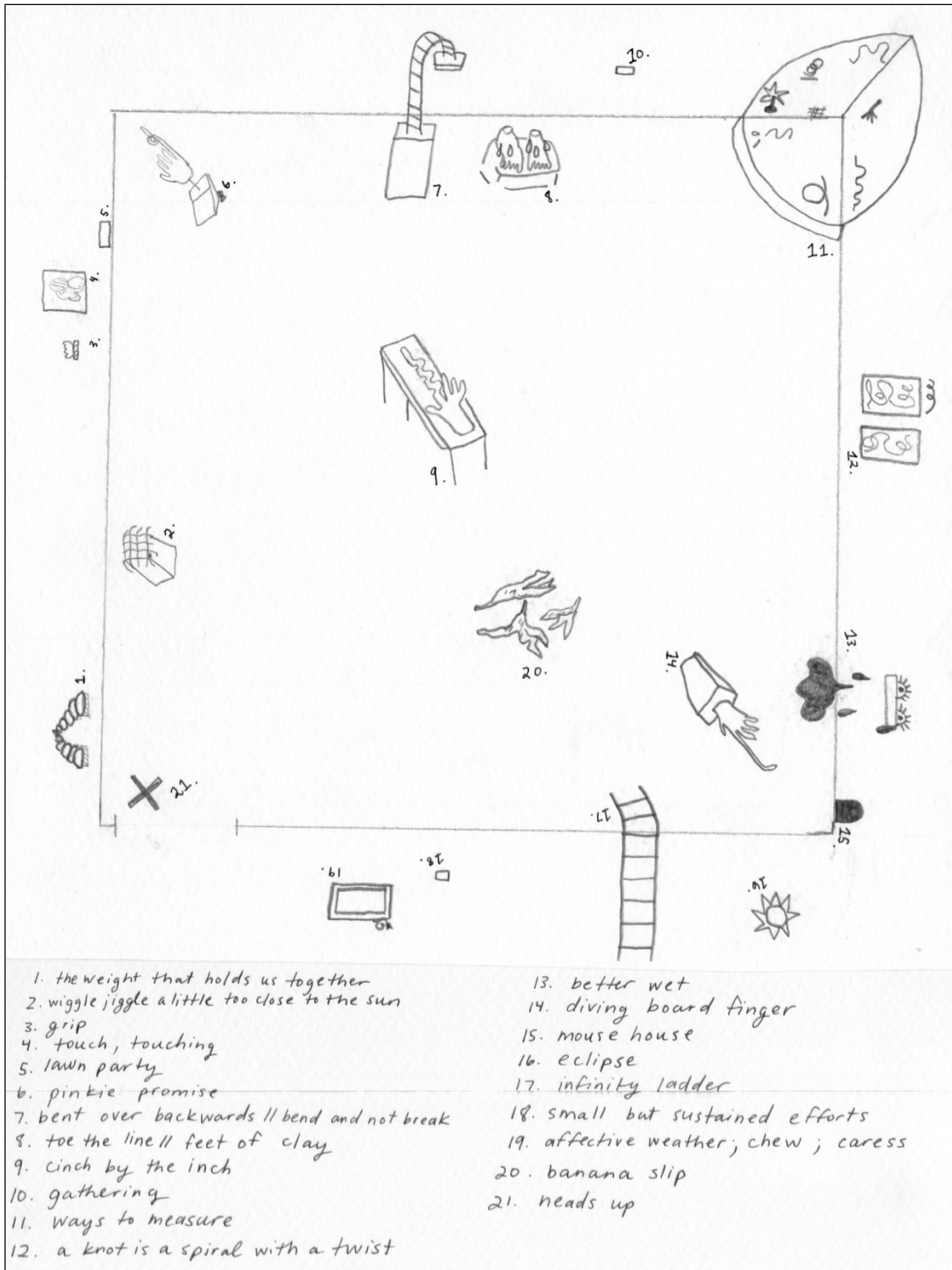


Fig. 10, hand drawn gallery map, 2023



Fig.11, *infinity ladder*, unfired clay, snail shell, 7'x16"x1" (dimensions vary), 2023



Fig.12, *infinity ladder (detail)*, 2023



Fig.13, *infinity ladder (detail)*, 2023





Fig.15, *eclipse*, mid-fire porcelain, 9"x12"x6", 2023



Fig. 16, *lawn party*, mid-fire porcelain, gifted glass snail, found rock, 2"x10"x2", 2023



Fig.17, *small but sustained efforts* (left), bronze, walnut shelf, 1"x1"x1", 2022  
*affective weather; caress; chew*, (right), video series, 2022



Fig.18, *diving board finger*, mid-fire porcelain, 4.5"x24"x2.5", 2022



Fig.19, *pinkie promise*, mid-fire porcelain, 4" x 2" x 15", 2022



Fig. 20, *heads up*, mid-fire porcelain, 16"x6"x12", 2022



Fig.21, *bent over backwards//bend and not break*, mid-fire porcelain, 15.5"x3.5"x32", 2022



Fig.22, *mouse house*, mid-fire porcelain, googly eyes, 2022



Fig. 23, *better wet*, mid-fire porcelain, dimensions vary, 2022



Fig. 24, *toe the line//feet of clay*, mid-fire porcelain, unfired clay, plastic, 10"x12"x9", 2022



Fig. 25, *the gathering*, mid-fire porcelain, gifted glass snail, walnut shelf, 1"x3"x2", 2023



Fig.26, *wiggle jiggle a little too close to the sun; banana slip*; mid-fire porcelain, foam plinth, blue raspberry bubble gum, dimensions vary, 2023



Fig. 27, *small but sustained efforts*, bronze cast snail shells, cherry wood, 2"x2"x4", 2023



Fig. 28+29, *banana slip*, mid-fire porcelain, dimensions vary, 2023



Fig.30+31, *the weight that holds us together*, mid-fire porcelain, 24"x5"x15", 2022



Fig.32, *touch, touching*, pencil crayon on paper, 19.5" x 25.5", 2022



Fig.33, *grip*, mid-fire porcelain, 4"x2"x5", 2021



Fig. 34, install shot of *is that a promise or a threat?* 2023



Fig. 35, *cinch by the inch*, mid-fire porcelain, 24"x4"x2.5", 2022



Fig.36, install shot of *is that a promise or a threat?* 2023



Fig.37, install shot of *is that a promise or a threat?* 2023