

# How to Write an Abstract When Your Hands Are on Fire

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Access, Hygiene & Quarantine: Chronically Ill Art in the Age of COVID session  
convened by Amanda Cachia

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## Abstract

Too often, the art historical canon treats artists' bodies as only worth mentioning in moments of narrative where they might lend profundity, rather than an ever present reality. We ignore that all art is born of physical acts and thus has the inherent potential to be a catalyst for pain.

Pandemic has found many of us working from home, a situation for which chronically ill folks have long advocated. While many reveled in newfound freedom to wear sweatpants during the day, I struggled with the supposition that being home meant things would be physically easier, that because I could work from bed, things should be more comfortable. My illness was not seen as a valid excuse for delay or struggle because I was already home, and the often digital labor of curating was seen as divorced from my body. The expectation of a shared sense of comfort in working in domestic space rests upon an idea that labor done at home is inherently non-physical, with no impact on the body.

Building out of my personal experience with chronic pain, this presentation takes as its starting point the development and ultimate cancellation of the exhibition *An Alarming Specificity* for Haverford College, which focused on embodiment and was called off to protect bodies in the wake of Covid-19. It will explore how to hold a space for pain in arts and arts administration by reconceptualizing sedentary labor as physical work and extricating an expectation of physical comfort from domestic spaces.

## Full Text with Image Descriptions

[Image Description (ID): On a light pink background, large white letters in a jagged font spell out How to Write an Abstract When Your Hands Are On Fire. "Aubree Penney" is written in smaller letters beneath in the same font. In the bottom right corner, a woman in a black shirt with long brown hair and bright red glasses reads the presentation. Credit text in the bottom left corner reads "Original text in Genderfail *Black Trans Lives Matter* 2020 Typeface."]

The full text of this paper, as well as a transcript with descriptions of the accompanying images, is available at [www.aubreepenney.com/caa](http://www.aubreepenney.com/caa). That's [www.aubreepenney.com/caa](http://www.aubreepenney.com/caa)

[ID: The white text on the pink background changes to say "For the text of this paper and image descriptions visit [aubreepenney.com/caa](http://aubreepenney.com/caa)," which, as a sidenote to you the reader, you've clearly done. Welcome! A small note beneath the website reads "Also, kindly note that my glasses are very shiny so

my ring light reflected in them in tiny circles. Oh, the joys of technology colliding with the very things we need to utilize said technology.” At the center of Aubree’s glasses, tiny bright halos of light block her eyes from view.]

In an homage to a 2019 untitled work by artist Shannon Finnegan and as an act of care, I would like to invite you to be as comfortable as you can be at this moment.

[ID: The white text shifts, now reading “According to free stock images, this is what ‘comfort’ looks like.]

One of the greatest benefits of not being gathered in a conference room together is that you can kick off your shoes, pour another cup of coffee, and watch this at your discretion.

[ID: A series of stock images, rapidly shifting, accompany this previous section. The first features a grey haired man facing away from the camera, hands laced behind his head as he leans back against a navy blue couch to relax. He is staring out a window with lots of bright green and sunshine.

The second image shows the lower body of a person nestled in a light brown chair, a copy of Vogue open on her lap against a fuzzy grey blanket. Their nails are painted dark blue, and a tiny light green cup and saucer hold her coffee on the low table next to her.

In the third image, a white tray table with two cups of coffee and an open hardback book atop a colorful magazine rests on a bed with a white striped ruffled duvet. Pillows at the top show the edges of text that seem to read “Hers” and “his.” A tan fedora lies on the bed, for goodness knows why. There is even a tiny, cone shaped vase on the tray table with dried autumnal berries and straw.

For the fourth image, a plate of crackled and golden sugar-topped cookies lie on a ceramic brown and teal plate. A cup of milk is nestled amongst the cookies, with a piece of broken cookie lingering on its surface. The background is teal and floury.

In the fifth image, against a white fabric background that ripples out from the center, perhaps on a bed, two hands wrap around a cup of black coffee. The arms have a pastel sweater with lots of curved stripey sections in lavender, teal, peach, white, and next to the ankles a white section festooned with fish in the same colors. A pile of light pink carnations lies on the bed, accompanied by a long golden spoon. The relaxing quality of the picture is made oddly tense by the spoon resting on those pristine white sheets.]

For those of you who will attend the live panel discussion, please feel free to be your genuine selves in that moment. Should this be set up so we can see you on camera, feel free to be in and out of frame, standing up as needed, fidgeting, stimming, whatever you may need. Should we not be able to see you, feel free to do all of those things anyways, if you aren’t already.

[ID: A light pink slide with white text reading “Being comfortable like this looks exhausting. And aggressively color coordinated.” Aubree is back in the corner reading the paper.]

I would like to recognize that for some of you, finding comfort in this moment is not possible, and some degree of pain is inevitable. It is for you that I have written this paper. I appreciate your presence in this moment.

[ID: A series of white text on light pink slides, changing rapidly over the course of the next part of the paper. For ease in reading, I have grouped them here.

The first slide reads, Fibromyalgia is a diagnosis of exclusion, so doctors must rule lots of things out first via testing.

Slide 2: It involves lots of blood work and people poking you.

Slide 3: Plus completing lots of diagrams that feature this average-sized man:

Slide 4: A white diagram of the front and back of an average-sized man, with instructions to shade all the locations of your pain over the past week on the body figures and hands. The feet, hips, arms, shoulders, back, neck, and hands are circled, with circles at the top of the head labelled "scalp" in messy handwriting. The caption at the bottom left reads "Paperwork for my rheumatologist | February 2020."

Slide 5: The white text on the pale pink background returns, reading, And reiterating your pain over and over...

Slide 6: The text continues, ...and over.

Slide 7: Recently, a new blood test was released, but it is very expensive.

Slide 8: Plus, medical research still hasn't revealed what causes fibromyalgia.

Slide 9: And there's no cure, only symptom management.

Slide 10: People's symptoms vary, but common ones include:

Slide 11: The symptoms pop up one by one in a list: Pain and stiffness, fatigue and tiredness, depression and anxiety, sleep problems, memory and concentration problems, and migraines.]

A few weeks before the North American onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia. After three years of crying upon hearing my alarm ring because I was still so exhausted, struggling through grad school when my brain felt full of cotton wool, and contending with constant aches and pains, I had a name, and perhaps more importantly, an understanding that this was not typical. For years, I thought everyone hurt all over all the time and fought through severe exhaustion each day, and I was just less able to handle it with grace.

After all, the problem with pain is that everyone has it. In so far as pain is embedded in our bodies, we normalize our own individual experience. In turn, the universality of pain often lends itself not to empathy, but the opposite, a sensibility of what I call "me-pathy," i.e. "I-have-felt-pain-and-my-pain-must-have-been-worse-than-your-pain-I-pushed-through-why-can't-you-just-do-what-I-did."

[ID: A slide reiterates the last sentence, with each word popping up in time to the reading: I have felt pain, and my-pain must have been worse than your pain. I pushed through; why can't you just do what I did.]"

In a country where 6 out of 10 people have chronic illness according to the CDC, this is unsurprising.

[ID: 10 stars are on the pink background. 6 are white, and four are a light gray.]

Most of us are sick, or at some point will grapple with chronic illness, or are close with someone chronically ill, even as the type, severity, and prognosis profoundly vary.

Because severity remains largely inarticulate, reliant on subjective 1 to 10 scales of comparison and charts with increasingly grimacing happy faces, we find ourselves at a loss in even articulating our pain to each other. Outside of the rare instances of scientific testing attempting to quantify pain non-subjectively, which brings with it its own complexities and disparities regarding pain acknowledgment and treatment frequently grounded in gender and racial bias, in our daily lives the only frame in which we can operate is based on our own experiences with pain.

[ID: A series of emoji-style faces, starting with a happy face labelled “0 No Hurt” progressing through various faces and pain levels “2 Hurts a little bit, 4 hurts a little more, 6 hurts even more, 8 hurts a whole lot, 10 hurt worst,” with each corresponding face looking more perturbed. The caption reads Emoji version of Wong-Baker FACES Pain Scale.

The following slide is a reimagining of this scale made with the plastic yellow faces for LEGO people, captioned LEGO version of Wong-Baker Faces Pain Scale by Brendan Bowell Smith.

At this point, the image transitions to a full screen of Aubree delivering the paper. You can see long, gold and black earrings peeking out beneath her hair. The ring light is still reflecting in her red cateye glasses.]

As a result, I find myself trying to channel my explanations of my pain into experiences that exist in a realm familiar to most via simile: “It’s like having a really bad sunburn, but you can’t put sunscreen on it or pop a benadryl and have it feel any better” I explain, over and over. The long simile feels easier on my tongue than the clinical term dysesthesia, which would still take an explanation anyways. My hands, my shoulders, my arms feel raw as my nervous system works over time, finding pain stimuli where there are none. I suddenly transformed into someone who wears tube tops in hopes of minimizing contact with fabric, only to discover that wearing tube tops on Zoom makes me look like I’m wearing nothing at all.

I wrote the abstract for this paper in ten minute increments, taking breaks to shake out my hands as the fire trickled down to the tips. I cried in frustration when brain fog compromised my planned work sessions. Writing this abstract hurt. Writing this paper *hurt*.

This is taboo: I’m not supposed to acknowledge the writing of this document, admit that I and my body were here writing the abstract and this paper, that it was tiring, that it was painful. It should emerge fully formed: Athena sprung from the head of Zeus with none of the gore of split skull and flesh rendered asunder. We gloss over Zeus’s agonizing headache beforehand, the wedge of Hephaestus plunging into his cranium. In a community so fascinated with labor and care, with pain and privilege, is this not a profound omission to act as if our work exists apart from ourselves, including our embodiment?

The digital era has compounded this, lending itself to the narrative of ease and productivity, obscuring labor as it increasingly physically parallels leisure time activity. Running data analysis on a spreadsheet or writing a paper physically looks quite similar to dabbling on twitter or falling into the black hole of wikipedia searches, though our parasympathetic nervous system may provide pain relief through the latter, but not the former. Eyes darting about a screen, fingers scrolling and clicking, periodically

pouncing on a keyboard. The mind reels watching a Zoom in a way not required by watching television, video cameras strongarm us into concocting self-portraits of attention and professionalism. Mental labor, emotional labor are physically exhausting. Digital labor is physically exhausting.

One of my favorite books is Kenneth Goldsmith's masterful *Fidget*, in which he attempts to itemize all of his movements throughout the day, ultimately becoming so overwhelmed by the task that he begins drinking and ends up writing backwards. I encouraged you to seek comfort at the beginning. Now for a few moments, channel the opposite: feel in your body the weight of your digital labors. How have your shoulders dealt with hours over a keyboard? Your wrists? How many days have you spent with headache, staring at a screen? Pushing through the exhaustion of Zoom calls? Sick and powering through a project? What hurts? What has hurt?

Take a moment to be that miserably, overwhelmingly aware of your body, where every flick of the finger across your mouse spurs your nerves to fire, each adjustment in your seat makes your back throb. Being human is complicated, being a human in pain even more so. Our digital labors are, all too often, not without pain. Sending our works into the cloud and piling our words into harddrives are not without physical cost, even as the physical manifestations of our work so easily disappear from view.

To qualify some labor as physical suggests that the other, what we term sedentary labor, is in its very nature not physical. That while there is labor that is more physically demanding than others, calling more muscles, more ligaments, and more bodily vulnerability into play, all labor happens through bodies. All labor is physical.

As such, all labor carries the possibility of pain. I am lucky: my body resists the productivity culture rampant in late capitalism with its constant reminders of its limits. I am the personification of the damage and futility of pressing onward. To "rise and grind" would kill me. I now work more deliberately, carefully dividing my time between projects and efforts, avoiding marathons of effort that would send my nervous system into overdrive.

I thought at the onset of COVID that perhaps this new world of increased work from home and the shared sense of mental taxation that accompanies just being alive amidst global trauma would align with my ways of being as a chronically ill person. And for a while, it did. We were generous with each other in the shadows of the early weeks of pandemic. And then I noticed the gradual creep of new expectations: that being home meant we were comfortable, and being comfortable meant that we could produce optimal work. When I cannot sit up in bed, my comfortable office chair at home makes no difference to my ability to excel at my work. Sweatpants do not mitigate national and global trauma, nor do they change how bodies work.

Now that the professional sphere has invaded our homes, eclipsing the idea of private space, rendering the personal professional, we are all the better positioned to insist that the professional be personal: that we are first and foremost beings in fleshy sacks of muscle and viscera and goo, wrapped in a bundle of nerve endings, and we are workers and creatives second, that mutual survival and comfort has to be just as important as profits or missions, if not more so. If we cannot take care of each other within our own immediate sphere, how can we anticipate doing good for others? How can we advocate for the bodies of others when we cannot advocate for ourselves and each other within our praxis?

Consider what it would look like if we imagined all of our colleagues were hurting. Would it change how we structure projects? Anticipate deadlines? Would it shift our timelines for emails? Would we stop allocating sickness to days, containing it to tidy 24 hour periods? Would we offer more flexible hours or

continue encouraging people to work from home? Reimagine office supplies to include objects which will nourish bodies and quell suffering? Would we offer more seating in exhibitions for invigilators?

How would we treat audiences if we assumed pain amongst them? Would we prioritize seating? Check how hung work would look from a wheelchair seat? Place works in elevators and bathrooms, acknowledging that these are vital spaces to certain bodies and will profoundly shape their experiences of a gallery or museum?

How can we create work environments and exhibitions in which the expectation is not automatically wellness? In a field that upholds perfection as more valuable than something simply being finished, and the work to benefit the public as more valuable than the wellbeing and comfort of its individual producers, how do we draw the line between professional pursuits and ourselves?

An internal interjection: my hands sting, my nerves suddenly convinced the skin is tightening around my fingertips, gradually pulling up as if I have put too small epidermal gloves on my flesh, flashes of pain rippling across my skin. The bones in my arms stir awake as an ache radiates from within.

My scalp prickles, tense and exhausted. It's akin to the feeling of wearing a high ponytail all day but on every hair, or your socks rubbing your leg hair the wrong direction for hours on end. I think longingly of February 16, 2007, fourteen years ago, the day Britney Spears shaved her head in an LA salon in a moment of catharsis after being denied access to her children following a rehab stint, a look of joy and liberation and exhaustion and pain on her face. I can't decide if my head would feel better that way. I then realize I am too vain, and that because my hair is one of the few aspects of my body visible on zoom calls, I would have to look at it being changed every time I take a meeting. The prospect of shaving seems both liberating and like admitting defeat.

The language of defeat points to a problem in and of itself. "Battle," "fight," and "warrior" terminology abound in chronic illness circles. "Fibromyalgia messed with the wrong girl!" as if it existed outside of ourselves, an inherently other to the self. Externalizing chronic illness offers the illusion of control. It renders it an antagonist, and as such, something not only fightable but conquerable.

Funnily enough, in the midst of my getting diagnosed with fibromyalgia, I was curating an exhibition on embodiment for the Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery at Haverford College. Featuring work by Shannon Finnegan, Chitra Ganesh, GenderFail, Yvette Granata, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Linda Stupart, and Eva Wö, *An Alarming Specificity* engaged with human bodies which do not align with a fictional norm grounded in white patriarchal hegemony. The exhibition examined ways artists subvert the predominance of white, heterosexual, cis-male, non-disabled bodies as the default of humanity, seeking to uphold individual bodies attempting to survive and thrive in a world which frequently neglects to support, protect, recognize, or heal them.

[ID: A series of slides show samples of work from the exhibition during the next section of the paper.

Slide 1: On a purple background, large letters in a loose, jagged font in curving lines read "an Alarm-ing specificity." Nestled next to the "ing" is a small circular image of a Black person with pink yarn hair being pulled to one side. They wear pink heels, a silver skirt, and pink and purple pasties. The background in the circle features lemon drops, purple trees, and small teal and pink fish. Behind the person's head is a green topiary circle, and a crown hovers just above their head. The caption reads: Genderfail *i am your*

*worst fear i am your best fantasy* / FIRST GAY AMERICANS 2017 Typeface; Eva Wö *Supreme Queen in Charge* [Featuring Icon Ebony Fierce, costuming by Wit López 2018 (detail)

Slide 2: On a rectangle colored light blue with colored pencil, red-orange handwritten letters in all caps read “Falling behind in a group of people walking.” The caption reads: Shannon Finnegan *Self Portrait* 2018 | *An Alarming Specificity*.

Slide 3: A person in a white dress and white latex hood with only a hole at the mouth sits on a glacier and leans over to lick it. They wear white gloves with pointed red nails, and a tattoo of a woman is visible on their bare arm. The rosy, rotundness of their flesh is in stark contrast to the white of the dress and the grey of the melting piece of glacier. In the background are the sea and other large chunks of ice. The caption reads “Linda Stupart *After the Ice, the Deluge, performance documentation, Svalbard Archipelago*, Summer 2019 | Photograph by Ryan Sloan | *An Alarming Specificity*.

Slide 4: A text sample featuring the upper and lowercase alphabet, numbers zero through nine, and various punctuation and symbols. The font is wiggly, handwriting-esque. The caption reads: GenderFail, *i am your worst fear i am your best fantasy* / FIRST GAY AMERICANS, 2017, Typeface | *An Alarming Specificity*.

Slide 5: In a black frame with a white mat, a woman in a black dress and heels reclines on a bed. The image is black and white. In place of her head is a framed image, featuring a closeup of a woman’s eyebrows, closed eyes with long dark lashes, and the bridge of her nose. The caption reads Lynn Hershman Leeson *Seduction*, 1985, Gelatin silver print, 16 × 23 in, Edition 7/8 + II AP Courtesy the artist and Bridgit Donahue Gallery | *An Alarming Specificity*.

Slide 6: This image description was written by Aubree and her collaborator Riet Timmerman as for the event *Let Us Love You as You Are*.

A background of blue skies and white clouds is the setting in which nine groups of people appear, welcoming you to the event. The majority is BIPOC. This diverse group takes the stage one by one, all coated in shiny, glittery, rainbowy filters. The first one is wearing a white skirt, apron and pearls with yellow and orange eyeshadow. They are presenting a cake to the viewer. The second one wears a white shirt patterned with brown squares. They are pulling their braids to the sides whilst pursing their lips and throwing us a kiss. The next one is a couple tangled in a close embrace. One of them, who wears a white tank top, hoop earrings and has black, orange and pink hair, holds the other one from behind, gently pressing a kiss on their shoulder. The latter one is shirtless and has black curly hair. The next couple has their arms wrapped around each other. One of them is shirtless, has curly, dark chest hair, a moustache and pink-blue eyeshadow. The other one is wearing a multicolored robe of blue/pink/green and blue-pink eyeshadow. They are playfully placing their hand on the other one’s chest, whilst the other one gently runs their fingers over the side of their face. The next group are three people who are laughing and dancing together. The front one has a large smile and wears a golden one shoulder sleeve top, patterned head scarf and nose ring. On their right side stands a person with braided hair, bright red lips and blue eyeshadow, they are moving their heads to an imaginary beat. On the left side stands a person wearing a black top and brown jacket, who sweeps their long, braided hair out of their face. The next couple is lovingly and intimately looking at each other, one of them has their hands placed around the other’s neck. The one on the right wears a blue sweatshirt, white glasses and has a yellow flower tucked in her braided

bun. The one on the left wears a red coat, hoop earring and has short blond-colored curls. The next couple is caught in an intimate make out scene. The one on the left has bright, blue hair, red painted flags across their forehead and wears a black blazer. The other one wears a black vest atop a red-white striped shirt, a black sailor hat and glasses. The next person wears a black dress, black pearls, and holds a fluffy, brown sock puppet in her right hand. The puppet wears a red ribbon around its neck and a white hat. The person and puppet are kissing. The last person holds a checkered vest in their hands, moving it up and down in front of their face, playing a game of peekaboo with the audience. The person behind the vest wears an orange tshirt, chunky necklaces and a black tie tied in their hair, whilst making a small o-shape with their mouth.

The caption reads, “Eva Wö Welcome [with Yixuan Pan, ociele hawkins, Eva Wö, Ero Rose, Zach Pfrimmer, Jon Pulse, Cameron Brooks, Lex Costan, Meeka Davis-Dunning, C. Michale, Debbie the Artist, Janke, Avery Rose, Faith Goodart, & Mindy Dunn] 2019, GIF | *An Alarming Specificity.*”

Slide 7: On a lime green background, a white box with black font reads: A SPELL FOR BINDING A SUPER TRENDY SEXIST HOT YOUNG MALE ARTIST’S INTERNET ACCESS

@Echo off  
Ipconfig /release

Save that as a .bat and send it to someone. Their IP address will be lost, and therefore they won't be able to fix it

The caption reads, “Linda Stupart *A SPELL FOR BINDING A SUPER TRENDY SEXIST HOT YOUNG MALE ARTIST’S INTERNET ACCESS* 2016 | *An Alarming Specificity.*”]

The day we were scheduled to open, March 20, the venue shut down due to the pandemic, following a week of close monitoring and debate about what would happen. Linda Stupart had flown to the US for the installation and a performance, just to have to fly back to the UK. Only the Ganesh work ever entered the space. But I maintain that this show happened. In fact, it took on its highest form, getting closer to the Platonic ideal of itself than I ever could have planned. What higher calling is there for a show about taking care of bodies than to radically alter itself to do the work of caring for bodies?

In the months since, I have increasingly realized that if I can radically reimagine the work an exhibition is doing regarding care, I should extend that same courtesy to the work our bodies are doing, my own included.

My body is insisting the current late-Capitalist, hyper-productive framework is unsustainable. My body can do its greatest work by insisting that pain and illness proffer insights of their own, that the agonizing pursuit of projects supposedly for the greater good at the expense of individuals is a Neo-Liberal curse, that bodies need recognition as they are rather than as we expect or hope for them to be. That ill people belong in every place people are and that we have much to professionally contribute.

When I was given the opportunity to build a virtual event out of my *An Alarming Specificity* research, I knew this was the space to apply this construction of bodies and work, to operate with a curatorial framework which considered care a guiding aesthetic principle.



[ID: A series of images featuring work and resources from *Let Us Love You as You Are* accompanies the final section of the paper.

Slide 1: On a pale blue background graduated in a ombre from sky blue to a light teal, a large pixelated blue circle appears. On top of it are pink letters in a handwriting-esque font, reading “Let Us Love You as You Are.” The caption reads, “*Let Us Love You as You Are* logo featuring Genderfail’s *Black Trans Lives Matter 2020* Typeface.”

Slide 2: On a white background, black text reads, “Please note, if you’re inundated right now and would like me to reach out again later regarding this email, please feel free to reply with an X, and I will circle back to you in a few days. If you are struggling and could use some extra support personally or professionally, regardless of the content of my original email, please feel free to reply with a Y, and I will follow up with you ASAP.” The caption reads, “Experimental email signature | June 2020.”

Slide 3: On a purple background, the registration website for Let Us Love You as You Are offers text in white with a pink button reading “REGISTER!” at the bottom. The text reads as follows: October 20, 2020

4:30 p.m. EST

*Let Us Love You as You Are* imagines the potential of exhibitions as care-taking spaces. This extension of the group exhibition *An Alarming Specificity*, which was originally set to open in the midst of a pandemic, takes up the mantle of creating spaces for bodies too often treated as marginal. Designed to nurture and affirm bodies, especially those of women and nonbinary people, LGBTQIA+ people, disabled people, and people of color, this event advocates for care and the sharing of care tactics as generous, loving processes that can be both individually and collectively restorative.

Artists Shannon Finnegan, Genderfail, Yvette Granata, Linda Stupart, and Eva Wö embrace the medium of Zoom to enable the experience of art in personal spaces, utilizing the digital format as a means of lending intimacy and comfort.

Sweatpants, messy hair, and pandemic exhaustion welcome. Come as you are to rest, learn, and be with us as this virtual exhibition unfolds before you and with you, followed by a Q&A with the artists and curator Aubree Penney.

The caption of the slide reads “*Let US Love You as You Are Website.*”

Slide 4: On the same purple background and with the same “*Let Us Love You as You Are Website*” caption, a continuation of the *Let Us Love You as You Are* website features links to Genderfail’s protest sign fonts as well as links to accessibility texts to works by Linda Stupart and Eva Wö.]

In developing the event, the Cantor Fitzgerald Team and I prioritized ease and rest in development and creation, as well as in the experience of said works. Rigor and rest can coexist. Together, the artists and I reimagined audiences not as people who have come to take in art, but people who can be cared for by the art and by the exhibition structure itself.

In developing the event we strategically consolidated emails for everyone’s sake, kept things simple and clear. I encouraged artists to find ease in their work and avoid making things difficult on themselves as much as possible. We prioritized larger payments over materials costs. We hired subcontractors for support who were struggling to make ends meet during pandemic. For graphic design, we chose a

typeface by Genderfail that would let every place the marketing went espouse that black trans lives matter through the title of the typeface. Our budget prioritized communication access realtime translation, i.e. live captioning, by a stenographer.

[ID: The image transitions back to a full screen of Aubree's face for the remainder of the presentation.]

Within the event, artist Shannon Finnegan invited attendees to be comfortable, to feel free to move around, to stim, to be themselves on or off camera during the event, a tactic I have adopted in my own presentations. Transcriptions and image descriptions were readily available online. Artist and writer Linda Stupart invited us to turn our microphones on and breathe together in a fond tribute to moments shared in rooms and breaths that carried less danger, to have a shared moment in the messiness of Zoom.

And it worked. I'm a chronic perfectionist, and I say this genuinely: it was perfect. It was an event not marked by precision, but by a generosity to ourselves and each other, that extended to our audience as well. While this model may not work for every project, it demonstrated that there is potential to reimagine how we do things and why, and that our audiences will respond in kind. It was the most thrilling experience of my career thus far.

Recently, I have begun working with Belgian-born and London-based curator Riet Timmerman as the newly formed duo Call You in the Morning, which will operate along these lines, prioritizing care as the determining factor for both our aesthetic and our working practice. This covers everything from ensuring we provide adequate seating in events to crafting image descriptions to resisting obfuscating language and references, such as using the word obfuscate.

We are currently building a digital residency, which will expand to being in person post-COVID, that will offer supported learning and exploration around a central theme within a small cohort of creatives, forging new networks of collaboration and encouragement.

I spent my MFA encouraged to not work with the same people twice, to keep moving like a shark, to always be aiming to work with bigger names and institutions in the art world. In contrast, Riet and I have decided to use Call You in the Morning to prioritize supporting both artists' practices and those artists' survival long term. We knew when we began we wanted to leverage what power we have as curators to encourage, nurture, and fund artists with whom we've developed sustained relationships, rather than constantly extracting cultural value and moving on like some sort of curatorial vampire.

Additionally, we seek to create an institutional structure that prioritizes the wellbeing of staff, ourselves included. In light of my health and a shared concern about work/life balance, we've also decided to try and keep this as enjoyable and pain-minimal as possible. I think back to a beloved mentor of mine at a UK museum who told me about reading papers in the bath and sleeping little because her time was so scant in the early years of her career as she tried to climb the ladder and prove her usefulness. In a museum internship program in the US, a program director fondly waxed poetic on her years of working multiple gigs in New York, being constantly on the move and exhausted, all for the sake of working her way up in the museum world. Listening to those stories at the time, I was in awe. Oh the hustle! The grind! How glorious to give yourself so utterly to the work you love, to overcome your bodily limitations for the sake of art!

In retrospect, I'm heartbroken and horrified. These models leave little room for the success of atypical bodies, for sickness, for rest. Let's break the ladder, and build an elevator. Let us be generous with our audiences, with each other, and with ourselves. Let us anticipate pain and embed care wherever we can, for all of our sakes. Thank you.