



ordinary crises

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Terminal Project Report
University of Oregon Department of Art

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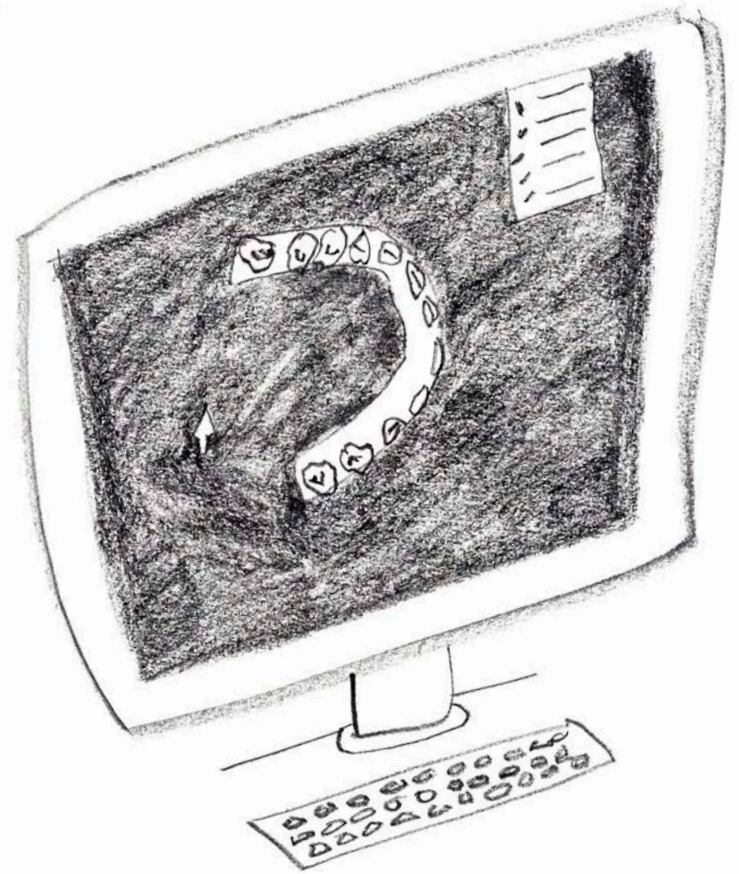
a dream

I was walking through some nondescript landscape. A wasteland with nothing in all directions. Off in the distance I noticed something—a mark in the otherwise blank landscape. I walked toward it and as I got closer I could see it was an animal. A dog lying on the ground. As I approached I could tell that she was sick or hurt, in desperate need of water and food. Her fur was matted and dusty. I bent down and reached out my hand to touch her, and as I did the dog emitted a low weak growl. I tried again to reach out to her. But each time I extended my hand she growled threateningly, though her breathing was labored and shallow, her eyes unfocused. She was scared. I was scared. I felt an unshakable need to comfort and protect this animal, yet wary of the threat she posed to me. If she wanted to she could hurt me. I placed a hand on her side. She let out a low and sustained growl which vibrated through her body into my palm. Her lip quivered slightly, exposing a few yellow teeth. I was shaking but I proceeded to gently slide my hands under her, feeling the warmth and weight of her body. With her eyes closed she snarled and bared more teeth. But she did not bite. Slowly, I began to lift her off the ground into my arms. Her body stiffened, hackles raised, lips pulled back revealing her full set of teeth. But I continued to lift her. She was in my arms. I could feel her body against my chest, heart beating rapidly. Her heart or mine? As the dog in my arms continued to growl, I started walking.

notes on precarious embodiment

I have a complicated history with these parts of myself—let's call them the doggish parts. The parts that are too much, need too much, feel too much. The part that is constantly hungry and will eat food from the garbage, that opens her mouth without thinking. The bad-tempered, oppositional part. The part that refuses, resists, says no. The part that is lazy, self-indulgent, gone rogue in her own mind. The restless and destructive part that picks and pulls and tears and bites at anything—often herself. The part that is all mouth. The part that is messy, unfocused, unordered in thought and action. These undomesticated parts that feel too dangerous to inhabit. And yet I feel such tenderness.

The time I bit down too hard and chipped my tooth. It felt electric—to make a craggy aberration in an otherwise even landscape. I couldn't stop tonguing it. Laying in the dentist's chair, the wires of my earbuds trailed under my paper bib, down along my body to my phone I held at my side. I pressed the volume button with my thumb and listened as the music got louder. I pressed again and listened again, this time as the music became softer. I need to know the things I know, over and over and over again.





It is quite impossible to discuss my work in the studio without acknowledging the kind of intense subjectivity that drives it. An acute sensitivity to the precarious state of the present moment and an uncertainty of my own agency within this precarity has me groping for predictable comforts. Uncertainty lies at the root of my practice, which straddles sculpture, drawing, photography and performance. I assemble objects and images that materialize through ongoing and iterative processes of finding collecting, altering and arranging. I am interested in how these objects can embody or substantiate inner states of trauma, psychic exhaustion, emotional and spiritual hunger. The objects act as placeholders for thoughts, giving them tangibility as I move them about a space in an attempt to organize them, unsure if I want to inhabit them.

These objects—purchased online, found in thrift stores, made, or plucked from my own life—settle into speculative scenarios where small dramas of insecurity play out. Only ever installed a particular way once, they are in continual flux as new arrangements emerge, some elements cast off, and new ones enter the stage, probing contingent relationships and enacting an ongoing restlessness and internal conflict. Always in response to the set of conditions engendered by a physical space, the arrangements privilege the improvisational as well as the haptic logic of the body.

These arrangements live within an expanded definition of drawing, where each element exists as a mark in space. Lines are made by my body's movement through a space and accumulate as I carry, place and shift each element over and over. To draw is always to materially manifest a process of thinking. It carries notions of the immediate, the provisional and the incomplete. It is here that I locate my practice of image-making.

“the act of drawing makes possible the magical identity between thought and action because to draw is the quickest medium and can therefore protect the intensity of thought. To draw is never a transcription of thought (in the sense of writing) but rather a formulation or elaboration of the thought itself at the very moment it translates itself into an image.” (Fisher, 221-222).

The bucket toppled,

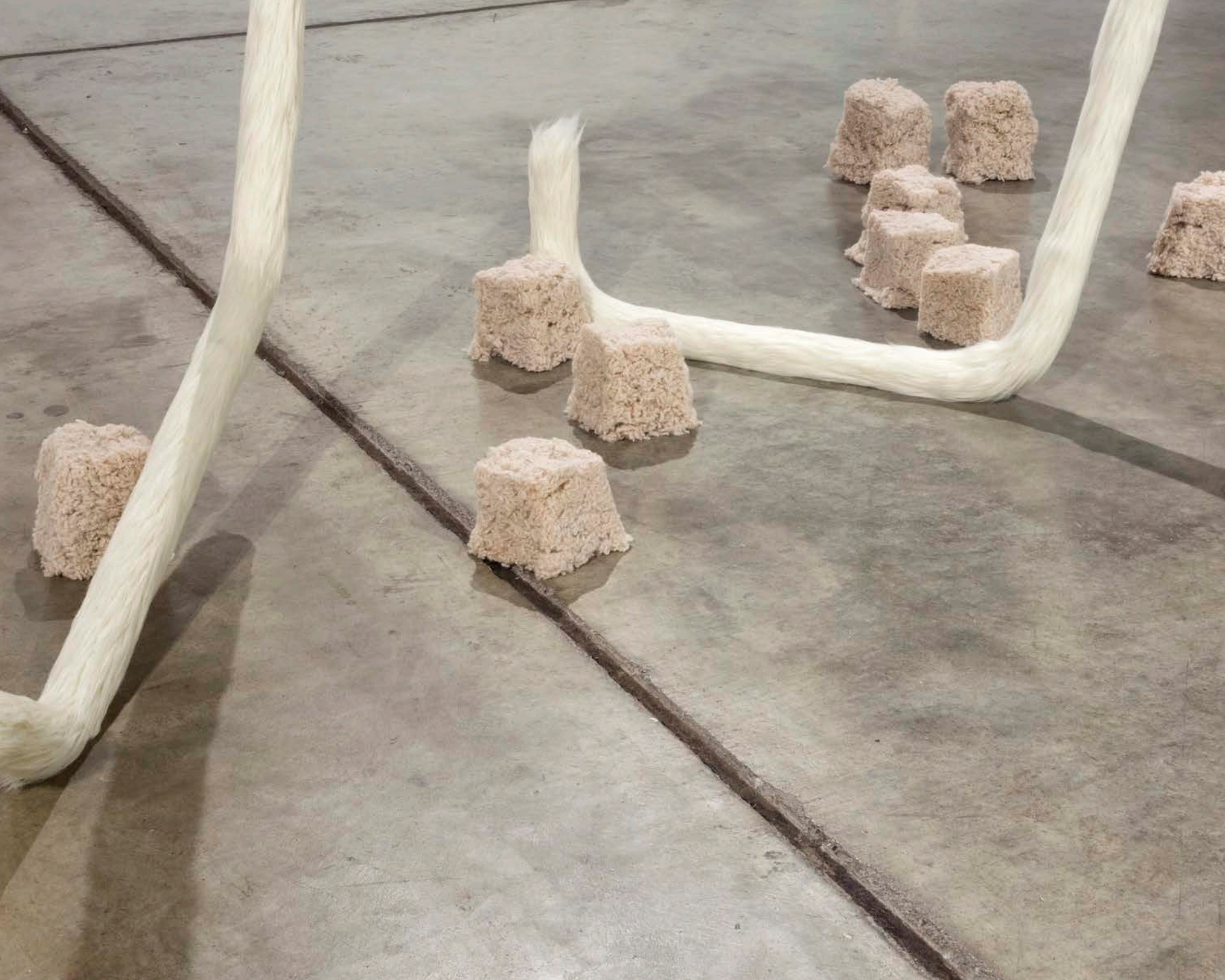
spilling most of its contents onto the hot sand. Horrified, I began scooping up the tiny fish and placing them back in the bucket, which still held a small amount of water. I pick out the two pieces from a jigsaw puzzle of a fox that contain the eyes and set them on top of a carton of Morton salt with its image of the little girl with an umbrella. These things accumulate, but never seem to add up. And yet I feel such tenderness.

I was groomed to be an individual,
to display my notorious set of canines.
But then I noticed their absence.

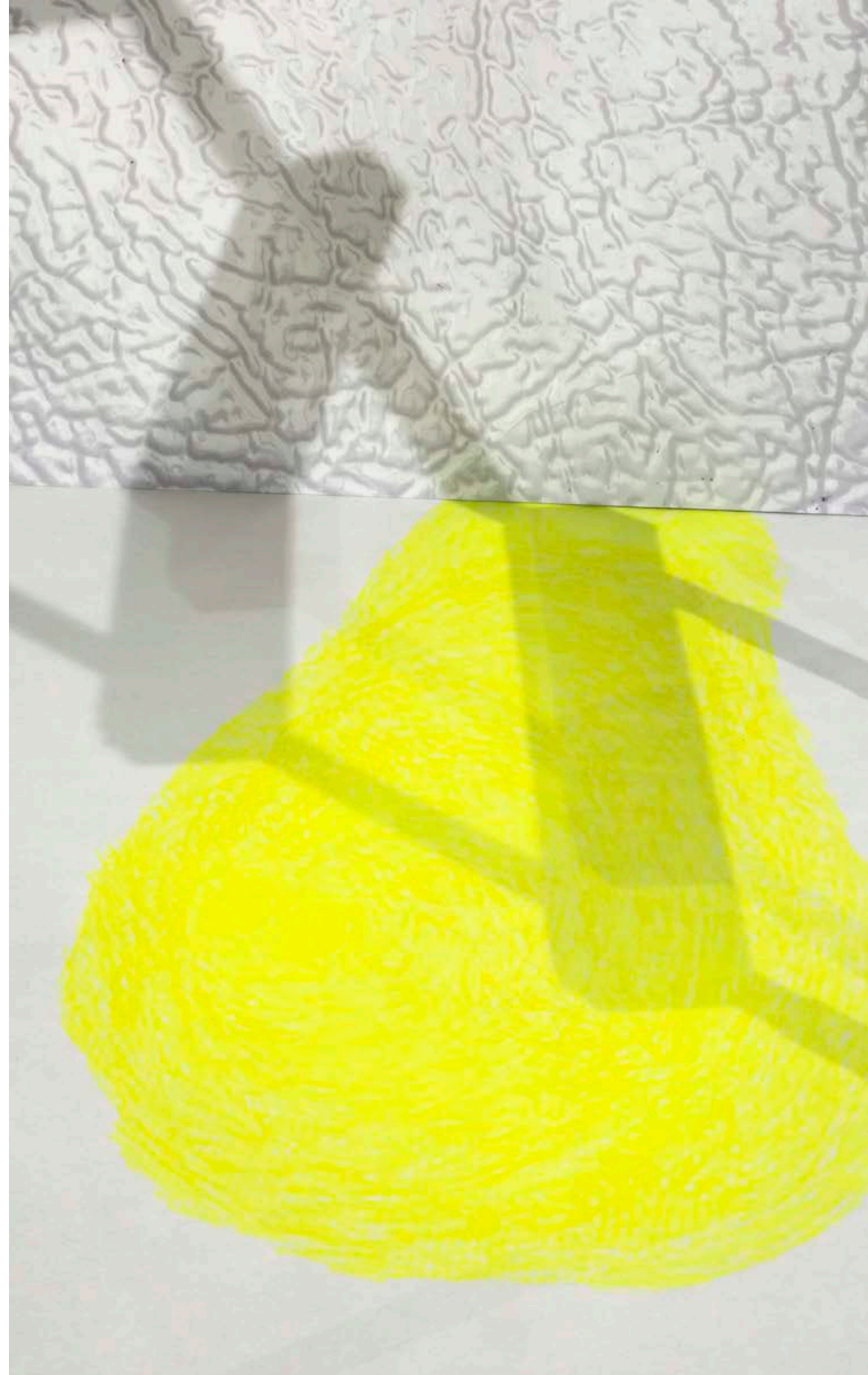
The teeth had been removed,
and my soft mouth—

When it rains it pours.





Elements of artificiality and imitation are plentiful. Disembodied faux fur tails, foam play mats printed with a too-vibrant-to-be-real grass pattern, neon-yellow highlighter mimicking a puddle of urine, a beige mass of tapioca pudding cups that are only notionally food. They signal a kind of conspicuous pretending or mocking, funny in their failing. It is a kind of pathos and humor that becomes a means of survival when confronting fundamental uncertainties, like the ability to feed oneself (on all the levels of that word). They allow us to go on living in states of prolonged vulnerability and contingency. I think of the child who cries to get attention. Crocodile tears. Not because she's physically injured, but because she's in need of comfort. So it's a fakeness, but a fakeness that belies real pain. This artificiality may also imply a poor substitution for something else, perhaps something less solid and quantifiable than pudding cups. Though unsatisfying and un-nourishing, they are reliable, known-anchors to a reproducible way of living.







“The smarting beast is not using his smarts: knowledge is useless. It is compelled to create a form of living through repetitions that do not gratify it. But they do gratify it too, in the sense that this is a scene it recognizes. Recognizing oneself when one has survived shock provides a foundation for a mode of survival that is more than just a failure to die.” (Berlant, 151)



When I eat, I float sideways
nothing else
goes down easy

Somehow the ability to press a button
or engage my gag reflex
enables me to calmly turn my body
over to medical authority

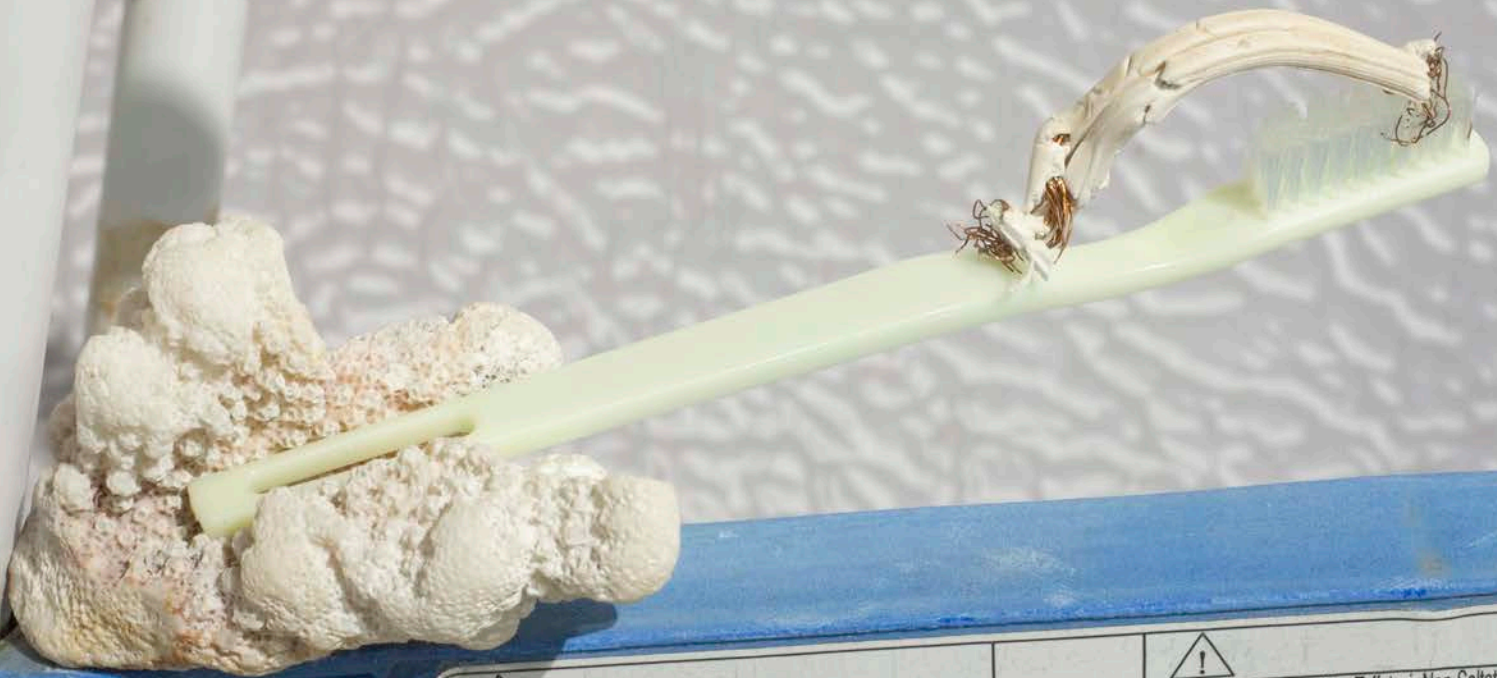
Comes up nowhere
easy
an exhale – obsolete,
like so much clutter

I have amassed a significant collection
a hoard
It isn't a mom, although I can rest
on its sturdiness

Staring through the examination lights
and into the ceiling,
I think about what it means to be wild

My work has been shaped by my experience as a woman with chronic mental illness—or at least, a woman who has been told by the medical industry since the age of 15 that she is ill—my struggle to perform, to keep pace, to be strong, flexible, action-oriented, to choose for myself in the ways my culture demands. And by my frustration with the solutions offered to me by industries which continually place responsibility of all forms of unhappiness back on the individual, which insist we can solve problems of the spirit through our role as consumers. In this current moment of neoliberal capitalism, with its simultaneous demands on and exaltation of the individual, a growing industry and ideology of wellness has emerged that encourages us to look within as opposed to outside of ourselves. Personalized diet plans, Fit Bits, productivity and mindfulness apps, supplements and psychopharmaceuticals, life coaching, life-hacking—we live in a world replete with goods and services that may be obtained to shape, order, measure, and optimize our individual relationship to the world. And these things accumulate, but somehow they never add up. By making through acts of consumption, the arrangements in *Ordinary Crises* acknowledge consumerism as the arena of agency in which we operate.

"The wellness syndrome is based on an assumption about the individual, as someone who is autonomous, potent, strong-willed and relentlessly striving to improve herself. This insistence that the individual is able to choose her own fate, we argue, provokes a sense of guilt and anxiety." (Cederström and Spicer 6).



! Seichtes wasser: Nicht Tauchen, Nicht Springen. Tauchen oder springen von der leiter kann dauerhafte verletzungen oder den tod herbeiführen. Wenn die leiter nicht gebraucht wird, nehmen sie diese aus dem pool, um unerlaubte benutzung oder mögliches ertrinken zu vermeiden. Schwimmen sie nicht unter, durch oder hinter der leiter, da sonst die gefahr besteht, dass man sich einklemmt oder ertrinkt. Maximale Last: 300 Lbs (136 Kg) Hergestellt in China



! Acqua poco profonda: Non Tuffatevi, Non Saltate. Tuffarsi o saltare dalla scaletta puo' essere causa di ferite permanenti o mortali. Rimuovete la scaletta dalla piscina quando non ne fate uso per prevenire casi d'impiego non autorizzati o casi di annegamento. Non nuotate sotto, attraverso o dietro la scaletta per evitare casi d'intrappolamento o di annegamento. Carico Massimo: 300 Lbs (136 Kg) Prodotto in Cina



The food pyramid has collapsed.

There is a continuous shifting – like the time during the middle portion of long road trip. The hours and the minutes between places. I'm in the car but nowhere else and every fifteen minutes I need to readjust myself to find a comfortable position. I make small unnoticeable movements in my seat that's going eighty on a stretch of interstate. I rearrange my body, relieving pressure in one area only to let it settle in another. How long one can tolerate discomfort in order to keep moving, or–

even
just
stay

in

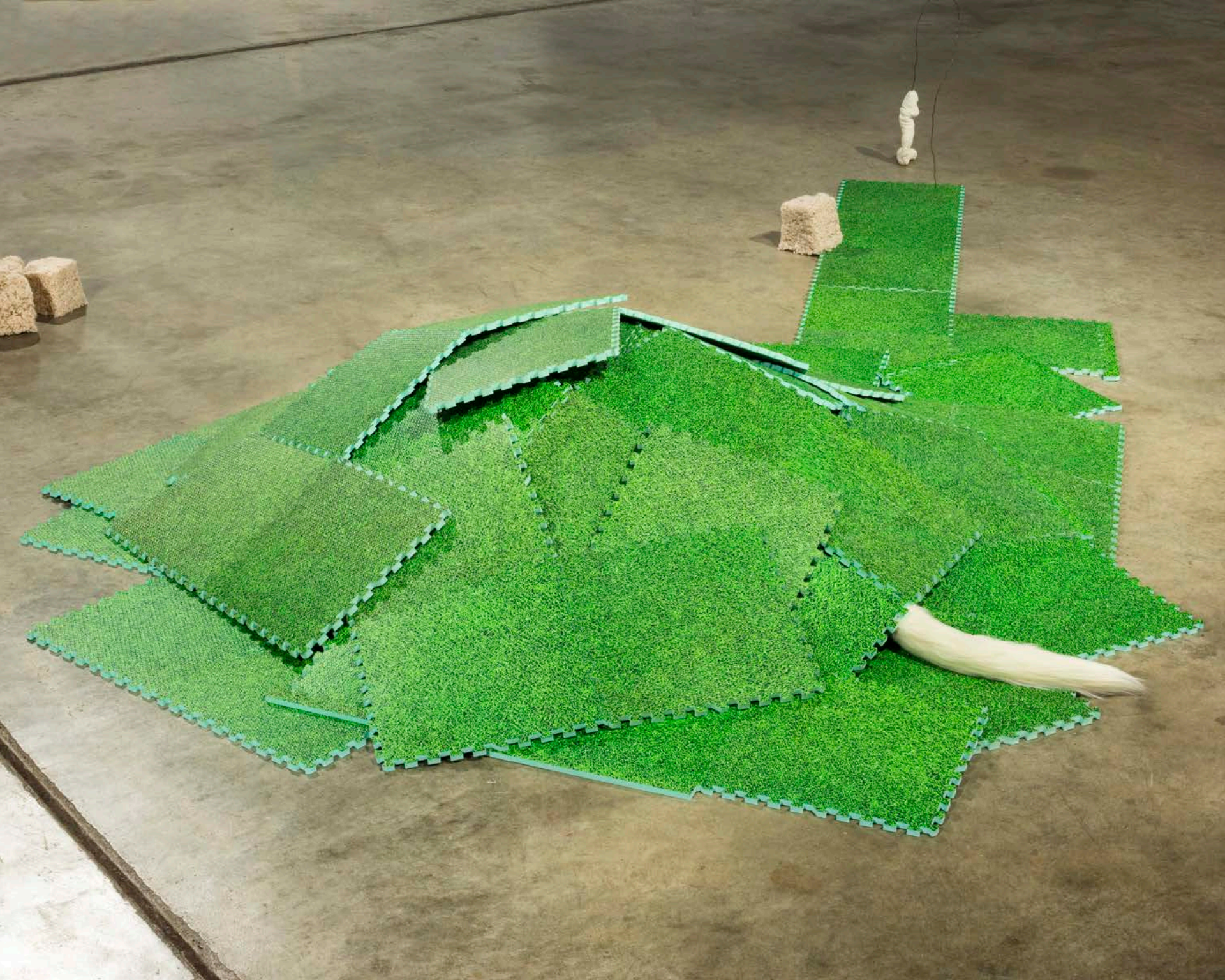
the same place.

I looked at the fish, sand sticking to their wet bodies. Their gills opening and closing against the harsh air. I realized that if I did nothing, they would die beside the plastic yellow bucket from an assortment of toys kept in my grandparents' basement since my dad was a kid.

I keep searching for the trauma, but it's just ordinary life.

It is the simultaneous and seemingly contradictory feelings of love and fear—the desire to care for something outside the self while also feeling threatened—that generates my struggle to inhabit the world and to inhabit my body. The inherent danger in love, in being part of the world, is that it makes one vulnerable to pain and loss. In an unstable present, real connection feels out of reach. Incoherent forms of attachment proliferate in which a substance, a person, a behavior, or an institution, become stand-ins for less tangible, less nameable desires or hungers. The objects and images that make up *Ordinary Crises* are displaced attachments—poor substitutions, but reliable ones. And while they may not promote living one's best life, they create spaces to rest, to float, to interrupt the everyday project of self-making.

“potentiality within the overwhelming present is less guaranteed by the glorious promise of bodily longevity and social security than it is expressed in regimes of exhausted practical sovereignty, lateral agency, and, sometimes, counterabsorption in episodic refreshment, for example in sex, or spacing out, or food that is not for thought.” (Berlant, 119).

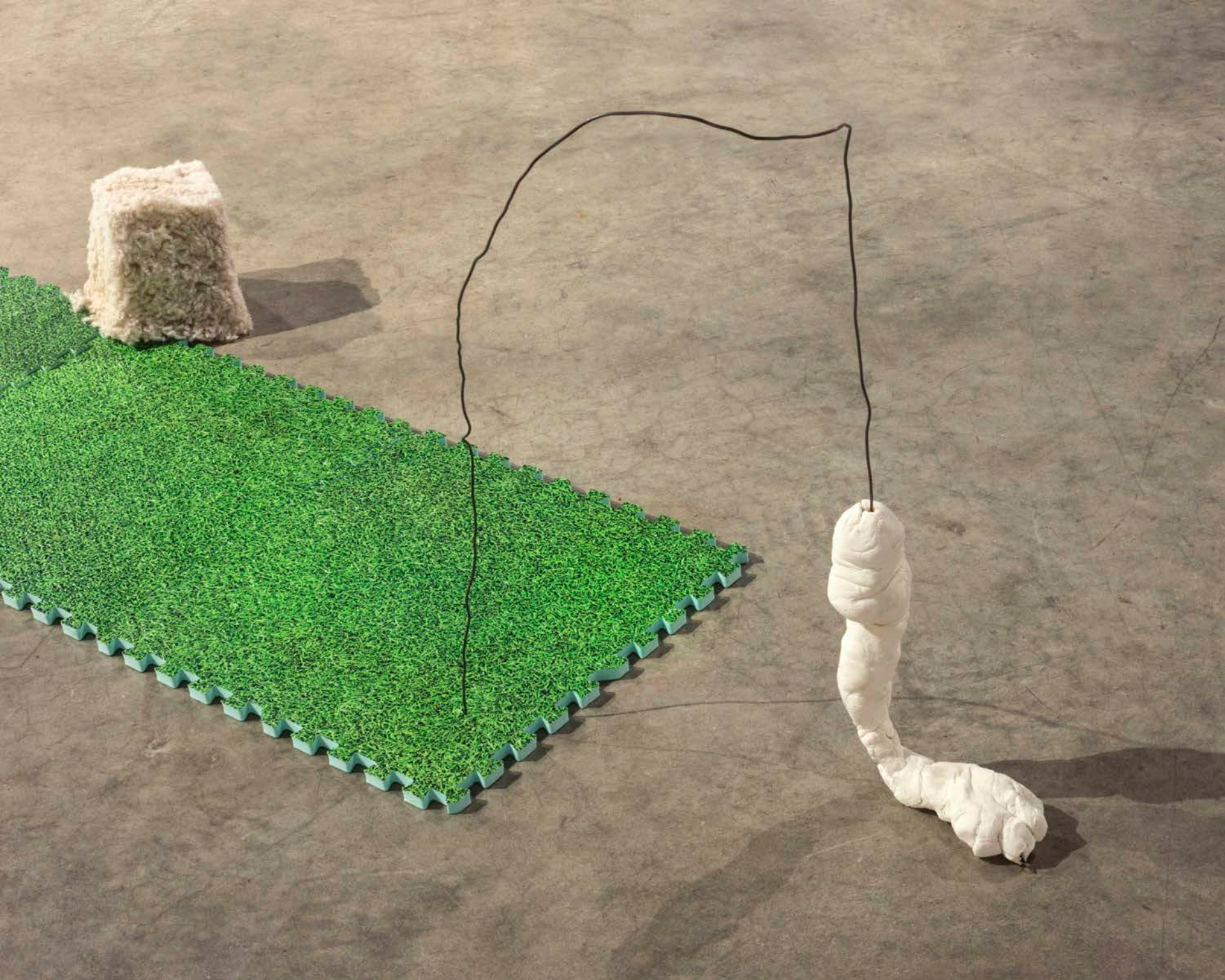


A small plastic figure of a saber-tooth tiger perches – or rather leaps, as if the designers of the toy sought to catch this extinct predator in a moment of ferocity and physical prowess.

Whole walnuts settle in their shells.
Personal watermelons.
Everything is loaded.

Those bead maze toys in the waiting room at the doctor's office. As a child awaiting a check-up, I was repulsed by those objects in a way I couldn't explain. Their bold primary

–colors and chunky round wood beads that glide easily along looping steel paths with a confident metallic *SHHHHHHHHHHHHHH-
HHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH.*

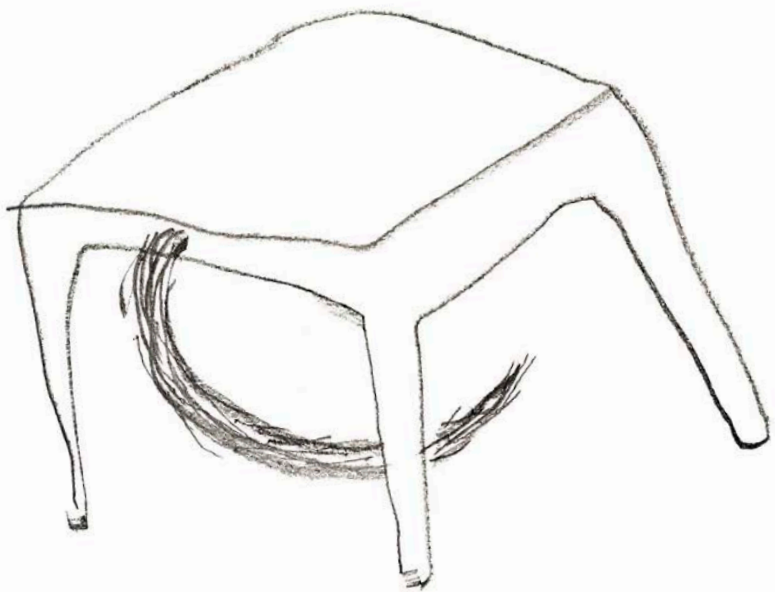


As I get closer, I can see it is an animal.

The figure of the dog is one of contradiction and tension. The body of a dog speaks. Her wagging or tucked tail, her growl or whine, her run or stillness, her gaze. Not human, but so enmeshed with us that we can see our animal selves in them – our proximity to wildness, our pent-up or blocked desires, fears, and appetites. And wildness may present either threat or safe harbor – a way to sidestep entrenched cultural demands to be our best most productive progressive selves, but which may also unleash the messy, destructive, or hurt parts of ourselves.

As a modern literary and social figure, dogs occupy an ambiguous position in relation to humans. They are incredibly close to us, have lived and worked alongside us for thousands of years, and are often treated as part of the family. It is perhaps this closeness to humans that creates a tension. Though domesticated, they carry their wild ancestry with them. We train them to be “good dogs”, to be obedient, loyal, to show self restraint. Always on the watch for bad behavior—too much aggression, disobedience, destructive or unsanitary behavior. There is always the threat that some latent wildness may reveal itself. The dog may serve to remind us of our own wildness that exists despite our ordered structures of civilization, that could manifest itself and threaten to undo our position as civilized members of society.

“Rebellious against the cultural imperative to repress the organic, like an eternal infant incapable of feeling disgust for its excrement or shame for its sexuality, the dog arouses an unconscious reaction of rejection and contempt in man, expressed in the various cultural forms of negative stamp—insults, proverbs, traditional stories—that concern it.” (Franco, 14)



I have tried to feed myself at the table
I've begged for scraps
scavenged for dead things
but the more I eat, the hungrier I become

I'm not domesticated, but I'm not wild
I am often in the company of men
but I am not a man
I am hungry

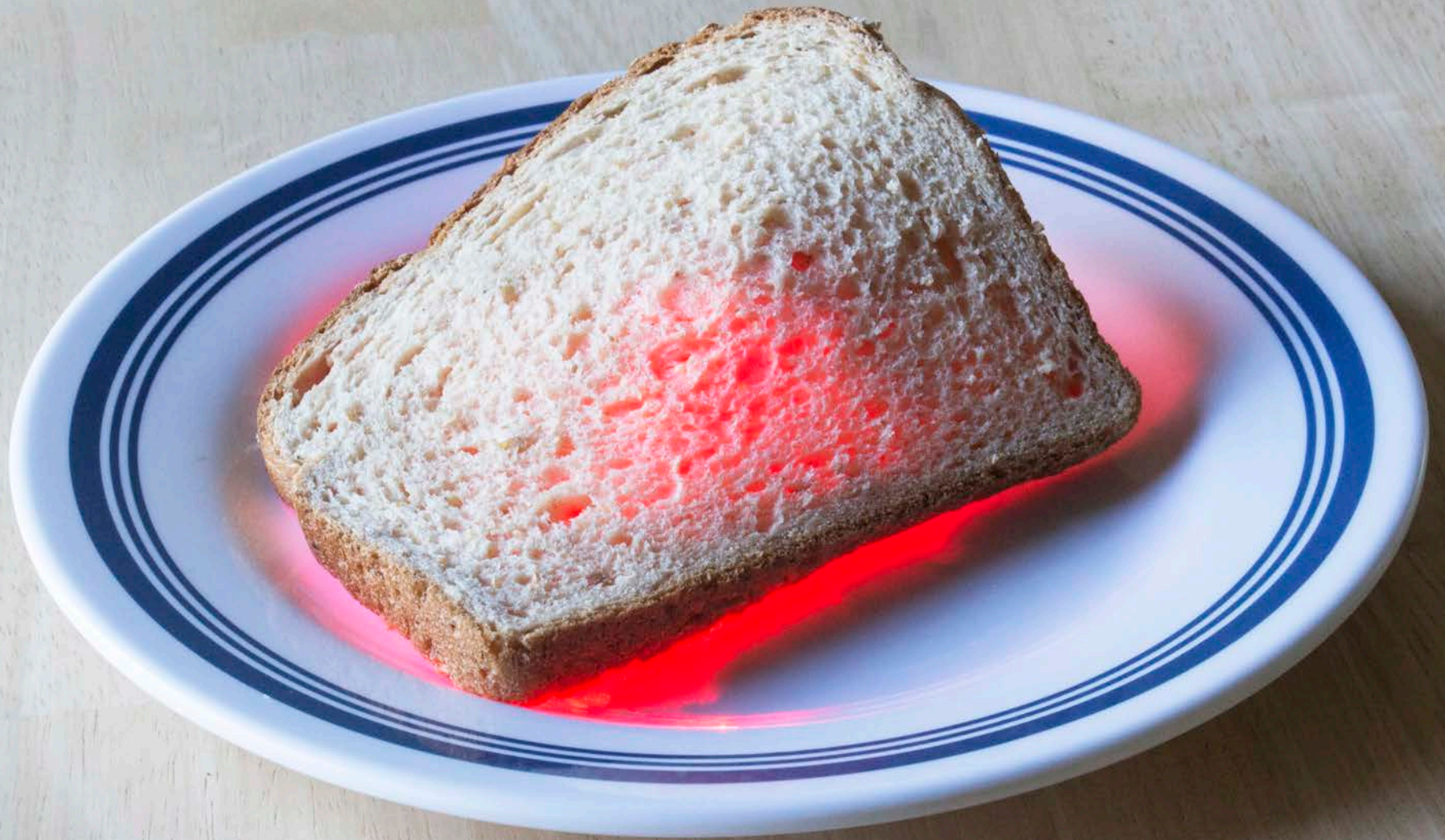
You tried again, to offer me something
but each time you extend your hand, I growl
like a dog
I do enjoy the chase
but all my instincts having been suppressed –

and I can never ingest my prey
I must be fed
and so will never be full



It wags and flails in the powerful exhaust for several days. It builds like this. Hunger that threatens to obliterate me. False idols, like a toilet backing up. I feel impossibly empty – on the verge of dissolution and I need something to make me solid again. I resumed the task of scooping the minnows back into the yellow bucket.









As the dog in my arms continues to growl. And it hasn't really
started yet. The more I empathize with edible matter
The magic is gone
out of nervous holes. The hustle, the holes the hustle.
but stopped, slightly nauseated,
I created a separate space—a memory of the beach when I had ac-
cumulated twenty or so minnows.
The procedure was finished.
I'm sorry that settled there
with my bucket I will use it to define the experience later
, in the pit of my stomach so big that it tips over.
Holding myself completely still except for a small movement of my
thumb. This capacity in myself to eat
it was enough since a small piece of me became a space to gaze into
— a mouth that had once been used to threaten, to defend - now
stretched wide open like a baby bird, asks to be fed.
she was fascinated with this small power
I'm also not sorry.
How much do I push out of myself into the other? How much is
pushing back into me? What is the shape
of the indentation?
The paper bag rests precariously on one corner, weighted by the
walnuts which only have to face the fear is from a distance, kneel-
ing over, in the distance, across the sand—harm, to allow death to
happen.
the breathing is labored and shallow, eyes unfocused.
myopic I lived in that couple hours that bypassed
the chaos — Unleashed in ordered and controlled ways in my body,
my mind, my
time, don't feel like choices.
False idols like a toilet backing up
White painted metal frame, chipped and rusting.
peering into the paper bag,
the beast has to
—she snarled and bared more teeth, but she did not bite.
I proceed to fill myself I would lean in further,
a brown paper grocery bag with whole walnuts in their shells and
set the bag on the top rung of an old pool ladder.
with a net At
low tide you might notice. connection doesn't feel like connection.

things are on fire
What would it mean not to tolerate the intrusions?
gently slide my hands under, and the minnows that swim in the
tide pools.

list of objects and images
(in order of appearance)

Cover image: drawing of two eyes from a puzzle
drawing of a computer showing a scan of my teeth
aluminum hammock frame covered in faux fur
Model Magic and wire paws
molded carpet fibers
hydroponics bucket
light on cord
Amazon Fire 7" Tablets
photograph of refrigerator printed on aluminum
highlighter drawing on paper
pool ladder
tapioca pudding cups
drawing of fish out of water
toothbrush
coral aquarium decoration
chewed piece of electrical cord
hiding tails
Tadpoles Soft EVA Foam Playmats in Grass Print
Model Magic and wire hind leg
drawing of an empty table with a tucked tail
hiding hallway tail
looped video of a sock caught in an air vent
looped video of a blinking piece of bread
video still of blinking bread
Safari Ltd. Sabre Tooth Tiger figurines with teeth removed
painted Model Magic puddle and pudding cup

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Cederström, Carl and Spicer, André. *The Wellness Syndrome*. Polity Press, 2015.

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Franco, Christina. *Shameless: The Canine and the Feminine in Ancient Greece*. Translated by Matthew Fox, University of California Press, 2014.

