

Fig. 1 Back cover of this is a ritual, pt. I (the book), made from a cast of the ground outside of Thomas St. Studios #103 in Athens, GA

# This is a Ritual

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# This is a Ritual

Moreover, it becomes apparent through consideration of ritual's form that ritual is not simply an alternative way to express certain things, but that certain things can be expressed only in ritual.

-Roy Rappaport, *Obvious Aspects of Ritual*

The ceremony must be found  
Traditional, with all its symbols  
ancient as the metaphors in dreams;  
strange with never before heard music, continuous  
until the torches deaden at the bedroom door.

-John Peale Bishop, *Speaking of Poetry*



Fig. 2 Shells sent to me by Dan and arranged by size and type in my studio

The meaning and practice of ritual is varied. Rituals can occur with decoration and solemnity, as in Catholic mass, or be marked by mundanity and repetition, such as the actions one takes upon waking up and leaving the house. For the purposes of this project, I will define ritual as a sequence of behaviors that are symbolic, contain repetition, and are non-functional.<sup>1</sup> In this context, “non-functional” does not mean useless, but rather that the actions performed are not causally linked to a practical outcome. Every morning when I wake up, I make coffee and get dressed. These actions are repetitive, but they serve a functional purpose in preparing me for the day. Before I leave my bed I touch the shell on my windowsill, collected from a place in Portland, Maine, where I walk with my brother. This action has no direct function in shaping my day's logistics, yet it carries meaning beyond its physical gesture. It is a ritual.<sup>2</sup>

1 “Don't Stop Believing: Rituals Improve Performance by Decreasing Anxiety - Article - Faculty & Research - Harvard Business School.” n.d. Wwww.hbs.edu. <https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=51401>.

2 In one example of the many ways this material has been used for ritual purposes, fishermen in the Trobriand Islands in Papua New Guinea cover their arms in seashells as part of a complex protection ritual that takes place before heading out into the uncertainty and danger of the open sea. Similarly, when I touch the shell in the morning I focus on thoughts of protection for my brother.

Rituals have long been used by humans to impose a sense of control and order, particularly in the face of uncertainty, disruption, and existential threats. They mediate transitions between states of being. Between birth and death, adolescence and adulthood, the mundane and the sacred. However, ritual is not merely a practice of maintaining continuity; it is also a site for rupture, where new forms of meaning and existence emerge. Sylvia Wynter argues in *The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism* that our current systems of knowledge (structured by colonial, capitalist, and ableist logics) are incapable of fully recognizing the complexity of human existence. She critiques the dominant Western conception of the human as a fixed, rational, and economic being, asserting that this definition is exclusionary and violent to those whose bodies and lived experiences do not conform to its narrow terms. If we are to move beyond these restrictive systems, Wynter insists that “the ceremony must be found” to create new ways of understanding and being in the world.<sup>3</sup> This project uses ritual as an organizational structure for the uncertainty and disruption caused by chronic illness, while also embracing Wynter's call by constructing a ritual space in which the human is redefined through materiality and the breakdown of normative embodiment.

*this is a ritual (parts I- IV)* is an installation that is formed by the arrangement of a book, a bell, a statue, and a game into a magic circle. In game studies and ritual theory, the magic circle is understood as a boundary that separates ordinary reality from the altered conditions of play or ceremony.<sup>4</sup> Within this bounded space, different rules apply; actions that might be meaningless or nonsensical outside of it take on a profound and symbolic weight. Time bends within the circle, collapsing through moments of distortion, repetition, and separation. The participants who step inside engage in structured movements that neither serve practical function nor conform to linear logic, instead enacting a process of transition and attunement to new forms of meaning. The magic circle transforms into a liminal space where an alternative cosmology, untethered from the dominant order, can be envisioned.

The state of liminality is central to both ritual and the lived experience of chronic illness. My interest in chronic illness arises from my own bodily experience and my efforts to explore the states of being that sickness and pain create, viewing these as generative spaces for learning and insight. To exist within a pro-

3 Wynter, Sylvia. 1984. “The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism.” *Boundary 2* 12 (3): 19. <https://doi.org/10.2307/302808>.

4 Huizinga, Johan, and Umberto Eco. 2009. *Homo Ludens*. Torino: Einaudi.

longed state of illness and/or pain is to inhabit a space where normative structures of time, agency, and selfhood begin to break down.<sup>5</sup> Just as rituals mark the passage between states of being, chronic illness places the body in an ongoing threshold condition, one in which stability is never guaranteed. The objects within this ritual guide the participant through non-linear experiences of presence, action, and sound, much like illness shifts perception, bodily autonomy, and the rhythms of daily life. The magic circle, then, becomes not just a site of symbolic ritual but a reflection of this lived liminality.

Jane Bennett's theories of vibrant matter help further illuminate this space. Bennett challenges the distinction between passive objects and active subjects, suggesting that all matter, human and nonhuman, has agency and affects the world around it.<sup>6</sup> Within the magic circle, the four objects are not simply tools for enacting a ritual; they are participants in it. Through active material transformations and the incorporation of human bodily materials like hair, the magic circle becomes a living system, one in which agency is distributed among objects, participants, and the conditions they collectively shape.

This ritual embraces dissonance and fragmentation, acknowledging that no singular meaning can be imposed on the body. It proposes a new kind of attunement; one that does not seek to resolve instability via control, but uses the organization of ritual to dwell within it. In doing so, it attempts to materialize Wynter's call for a new ceremony, offering a ritual space that resists colonial and capitalist definitions of the human. It acts as a threshold for engaging with sickness and decay as lively and transformative forces, a space for matter and meaning to interact in unpredictable ways, and for the body to move through time outside of the rigid constraints of dominant Western ideologies. The ceremony in this sense is not found in the restoration of an existing order but in the creation of a new cosmology, one that accounts for fluidity, permeability, and the lived realities of those whose existence defies normativity.

5 In *Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time* Ellen Samuels writes, “Crip time is time travel. Disability and illness have the power to extract us from linear, progressive time with its normative life stages and cast us into a wormhole of backward and forward acceleration, jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and abrupt endings. Some of us contend with the impairments of old age while still young; some of us are treated like children no matter how old we get. The medical language of illness tries to reimpose the linear, speaking in terms of the chronic, the progressive, and the terminal, of relapses and stages. But we who occupy the bodies of crip time know that we are never linear, and we rage silently—or not so silently—at the calm straightforwardness of those who live in the sheltered space of normative time.”

6 Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.

# I. The Book



Fig. 3 15th century Book of Hours, Catholic liturgy, ritual. Accessed in University of Georgia Hargrett Library.



Fig. 4 Dieter Roth, "Literature Sausage (Literaturwurst)," 1969, published 1961-70. Artist's book of ground copy of *Suche nach einer Neuen Welt* by Robert F. Kennedy. Gelatin, lard, and spices in natural casing. Overall (approx.) 12 x 6 11/16 x 3 9/16 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Print Associates Fund in honor of Deborah Wye.

A book is a sequence of spaces. Each of these spaces is perceived at a different moment—a book is also a sequence of moments.

-Ulises Carrión, *The New Art of Making Books*

Some of the words that we still do not have, I contend, are the words that can evoke the materiality and trans-corporeality of the human self.

-Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*

Wait, later this will be nothing.

-Dieter Roth, *Snow*



Fig. 5 Ground Paper Archive, 2022-2023  
Paper casts taken off the ground over the course of one year. Casted information was collected during periods of extreme flooding (Vermont), a two week drought (Georgia), and a hurricane warning (Tennessee) among other weather events. Made with various fibers. Dimensions variable. Photo by Lindsey Kennedy

*In April 2024, during the most beautiful and temperate time of year in the South, I spent almost the whole month sequestered in my home. During this period, my legs stopped working properly. Every time I stood for more than a minute, pain started in the base of my feet and shot up to my waist. I spent over 15 hours each day sleeping, only getting out of bed periodically to obsessively test the function of my legs (starting a timer and making it only 1 minute and 30 seconds before the pain became unbearable and forced me to lie back down). I was exhausted and simultaneously frustrated at my exhaustion, pushing against it and feeling at war with my whole body—a sort of feedback loop of psychic and physical pain. It was during this time that I decided to start bathing with my materials. I sent my partner to my studio to bring back a pile of my collection of "ground paper", or, casts I have made by pressing paper pulp into the surface of the ground in different locations. I began with pieces I made outside my studio in the previous 2 months and pieces I made outside my sister's apartment on a visit to New England the year before (instantly recognizable to me because of the mark her tire made after she ran over the wet pulp with her car). The impulse to be close to this material; dirt, dead insects, and cigarette butts, was not immediately clear. Maybe I was aware that my brain fog and fatigue made me particularly unable to write about what is happening to my body and I wanted another way to record the experience, or maybe prolonged time under hospital fluorescents left me with a desire to be surrounded by the liveliness of filth. For the next couple of months after bringing the material into my home, I drew hot baths and climbed in with the paper, ripping it methodically into smaller pieces, and letting the pulp, soil, collected waste, and indentations from places that I've been dissolve all around me. (04/05/2024 - ???)*

*this is a ritual, pt. I (the book)* sits on a granite slab with the intention of being read by two people at once, accompanied by a bench large enough for both to sit side by side. It is the first step of what is meant to be a structured interaction with four ritual objects, serving as an instruction manual for how to proceed with the other three. The book itself is large, and turning its oversized pages necessitates a sweeping motion of the arm, emphasizing the first step of the ritual as an embodied and participatory act. This book is inspired by a book of hours, a medieval illuminated manuscript that was used for daily recitation of prayers suited to its individual owner, as well as a record of births and deaths in their family. Books of hours were devotional tools used to structure time and shape the readers' relationship to the divine. As objects, they were valued not simply for the prayers that they held within them, but because they "embodied their owners lives and relationships."<sup>1</sup> The ritualized act of reading these texts was as much about presence and contemplation as it was about absorbing meaning through language. Yet, these manuscripts also reveal the limitations of language in fully capturing human experience. The intricate illuminations, marginalia, and embellishments often extend beyond the written word, suggesting that meaning exists in excess of language, in the spaces between text, image, and materiality.

Italo Calvino observed, "The struggle of literature is in fact a struggle to escape from the confines of language; it stretches out from the utmost limits of what can be said." Similarly, Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* describes the challenge of explaining travel through time and space: "Explanations are not easy when they are about things for which your civilization still has no words." Words for certain feelings and experiences do not always translate across languages<sup>2</sup>, and moments of overwhelming emotion are often described as leaving one at a *loss for words*.

By foregrounding interaction and materiality alongside text, the form of the artist book lends itself to the communication of things that words cannot. Dieter Roth, a pioneer of the artist book medium, used visceraally decaying materials such as lard, chocolate, and sausage casings to push against the confines of the traditional

1 Reinburg, Virginia. "For the Use of Women: Women and Books of Hours." *Early Modern Women* 4 (2009): 235–40. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23541586>.

2 There is no direct English translation for the Japanese word *wabi-sabi*, an adjective used for an aesthetic that finds beauty in imperfection, impermanence, and a state of becoming. This word offers compelling insight for disability studies and chronic illness by challenging dominant Western ideals of perfection and permanence, and embracing the inevitability of change and the profound meaning found in states of flux and adaptation.

bookform. This materiality eschews the model of the perpetual archive and highlights the book's vulnerability to the ravages of time, which is perhaps the essence of the book that links it to humans most intimately. Though traditionally bound books, often treated with reverence and carefully preserved as precious objects, carry an air of institutional or informational authority that can obscure their materiality, they too, like us, will one day rot<sup>3</sup> into nothing.

In Western cultures, there is an attraction to the impermeable and the concept of the boundary as a stable and fixed entity. This can be seen in the violence perpetuated in the name of upholding state-sanctioned borders, the rabid dissemination of single-use plastics via their initial promises to keep contaminants out<sup>4</sup>, or in the marginalization of disabled bodies due to their increased inability to be fixed and stable. The borders of the human body are merely a convention, and this illusion collapses more immediately when looking at bodies that fall outside of the normative standard. In disabled and chronically ill bodies, the illusion disappears because there is a more visible cause and effect between these bodies and the environmental factors that act upon them. Light, smells, noises, touch, and toxicities from the so-called outside entangle with these bodies, as they do with all bodies, in ways that make them visibly altered, escalated, weakened, or in need of adaptation. In her seminal writing on plastic materials, Heather Davis writes,

*a refusal of the fantasy of containment, management, or barricade—allows for the potential to face futures that consist of suffering, joy, slow death, decline, survival, flourishing, and hope, rather than clean breaks and ends. The fiction of independence and impenetrability is one that only a few bodies can bear.*<sup>5</sup>

Paper is a porous material. During the creation of paper, pulp sits in a bath of water, waiting to be strained into sheets. It is a body, permeable and liquid. For the pages of *this is a ritual, pt. I (the book)* I used various papermaking processes to create apertures, text, and material inclusions all forming substrates for added text and image. To form the cover, I used a more unconventional process, which began by taking paper pulp and using it to make a cast of the ground.

This process involves pouring a bath of natural fibers and water onto the ground and then carefully

3 Dieter Roth delighted in the fact that his last name is pronounced "rot", and was known to sign his artists books and other work this way.

4 Davis, Heather M. *Plastic matter*. Durham, North Carolina : Duke University Press, 2022.

5 Ibid.

sponging up the excess water. In addition to recording with a cast using the ground surface as a mold, the pulp collects debris from the location where it was poured. The paper fiber clings to any surrounding organic or waste materials, infusing with them as the water evaporates. When the paper dries, the result is a recording of place that includes topographical information such as lines from sidewalks and indentations of earth, as well as cigarette butts, insect bodies, plastic waste, and dirt.

After making this initial ground paper, I then take the paper back into a wet stage of pulp by putting the paper into my own bathtub. I bathe with the pulp in my home and wash my skin with the water from the bath, tearing up the paper into small bits and exfoliating my skin into the dirty water. I let the material from the ground interact with the material from my body, eventually separating the pulp once again to make a new mold of the ground. This time, the paper pulp contains the material from the first location, materials from my body, and after being pressed into the ground a second time it will contain the material and information from this new landscape.

The absorbent quality of paper pulp allows it to not only interact with the landscape and my body, but to swallow up and incorporate the identities of both within its materiality. In addition to recording information with a mold, it is sucking up evidence of life and interaction into its fibers. In these ways, paper is used as a collaborator to harness the phenomenon of boundarylessness, and to extract, combine, and record latent information from my body and the landscape. Its context and history of being used for recording notwithstanding, what makes paper so well suited to tell human stories (with or without using words) is that its nature is so similar to ours: it's porous, absorbent, leaky, moldable, and prone to inevitable decay.



Fig. 6 Ground Paper Archive, 2022-2023 (detail)  
Photo by Lindsey Kennedy



Fig. 7 Back cover of *this is a ritual (the book)* on the ground  
outside of Thomas St. Studios #103 with earthworm

## II. The Bell

Some conversations escape as they leave and enter  
the lobby  
When the movie's over  
And everyone leaves the theatre  
The accumulated sound leaves with them  
-David Byrne, (*The Gift of Sound*) *Where the Sun  
Never Goes Down*

Hermes defeated Argus by showing how sound,  
through its very ubiquity, unites space in its entirety  
and makes of it a single phenomenon perceptible to  
all, whereas sight always remains multiple. The audi-  
ble occupies ground through its reach, power belongs  
to whomever has a bell or a siren, it belongs to the  
network of sound transmitters.  
-George Serres, *The Five Senses*

*I feel the pounding in my head right now and it feels  
insane to be looking at a computer screen. Maybe I  
should be writing this out by hand? The blood hits my  
temples rhythmically like a clock-  
(boom boom boom, tick-tock tick-tock).*

*I am in this state so often: not sick enough to be physically isolated in my home and bed-rid-  
den, but not well enough to feel like I am actually present in my day to day. The blood pump-  
ing behind my eyes creates a sound that saturates my body and sets a constant tone for the  
environment surrounding me (boom boom boom). I am just present enough in the world to  
still actively move through it, while also feeling constantly disoriented by the sound of my own  
voice any time I speak to other people. The outside world exists in competition with the din of  
my throbbing brain. Like the uncanniness of hearing a recording of yourself, the words leave  
my lips and sound like a stranger over the beat of my blood. The pounding in my skull over-  
takes every other noise, making it bizarre and often unbearable. (2/27/25)*

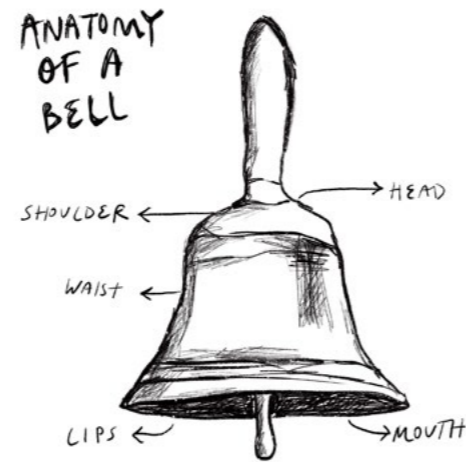


Fig. 8 Diagram of a bell



Fig. 9 this is a ritual, pt. II (the bell)

After reading the book, the two participants of the ritual separate from each other. One goes to ring the bell and one goes to the statue. The opening part of a bell is called a mouth, and this instrument has four. When the participant goes to *this is a ritual, pt. II (the bell)* to ring it, the bell's sound is electro-acoustically altered and emitted from another pedestal where, after a delay, it replays, layered with time distortion, dissonance, echo, and reverb.

Sound may be the phenomenon that most universally helps us understand the permeability of the body. It does not remain external, but rather enters us, vibrates through us, and alters us. Being close to a fire alarm or hearing the deafening whine of an ambulance doesn't just change the way you experience a space, it changes your physicality. Sound waves travel through the ear canal to the eardrum, which vibrates and transmits the sound to three tiny bones in the middle ear. These bones amplify the vibrations and send them to the fluid-filled cochlea, where hair cells detect different pitches and convert the vibrations into electrical signals sent to the brain for interpretation. Deaf individuals experience sound differently (and in varying ways) through bone conduction, where vibrations bypass the ear and resonate directly through the skull, embedding sound within the body itself<sup>6</sup> By way of our orifices or bones, sound brings us to another state of being, dissolving the boundary between inside and outside.

The change of bodily state triggered by sound must have been in mind the first time a ritual instrument was made. Bells, drums, and chants are not simply tools for marking sacred time, but mechanisms for the transition into altered states of consciousness. The human body is innately connected to the body of the musical instrument. Both contain a "resonating interior", and mediate sound through rhythm, vibration, and the movement of air.<sup>7</sup> When we ring a bell, we extend ourselves beyond our bodies, sending

<sup>6</sup> Shaheem Sanchez, a Deaf dancer, describes the sensation of hearing music, "My body feels like, when I dance, it feels like an earthquake"

<sup>7</sup> Sarbadhikary, Sukanya. "Aural Auras of Inner Sounds: Conch Shells, Ritual Instruments, and Devotional Bodies." In *Religious Sounds Beyond the Global North: Senses, Media and Power*, edited by Carola E. Lorea and



Fig. 10 Paper wrapping on pedestal for *this is a ritual pt. II (the bell)* during the wet stage

sound into the surrounding space where it lingers, transforms, and returns to us as an altered presence. The body and instrument co-create sound and, in turn, that sound transforms the body.

The ringing of this bell, with its four mouths<sup>8</sup>, does not simply mark a moment in time but initiates a liminal passage. The sound is heard once when it is rung, then again as the warped and echoing version of itself. Just as a ritual marks a transition between phases of existence, the bell creates a sonic threshold that, through its distortion, highlights the instability of the body. A body that experiences chronic pain exists often in this unstable and warped reality, as illness unsettles familiar modes of communication and presence. The contorted transmission of the bell's sound across the installation and into another sculpture collapses the space and reflects an altered form of perception experienced during illness. Yet, rather than merely manifesting the experience of chronic illness for those who do not live it, this dissonant soundscape suggests that the disruptions of illness are not solely sites of suffering but portals to other modes of knowing and being. If defining a practice as a ritual elevates an action to the domain of the sacred, then ringing this ritual bell does not serve to call the ringer back to their center. Instead, it acknowledges an altered sense of attunement that, like illness, resists linearity and coherence. This experience reveals new ways of relating to time, space, and the body, positioning the state of illness within the same transformative realm as the divine.

Rosalind I.J. Hackett, 97–112. Amsterdam University Press, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.20093336.7>.

<sup>8</sup> A site on the human body that is associated with sexuality, communication, and porosity, the mouth itself can be seen as a symbol of interwoven systems.

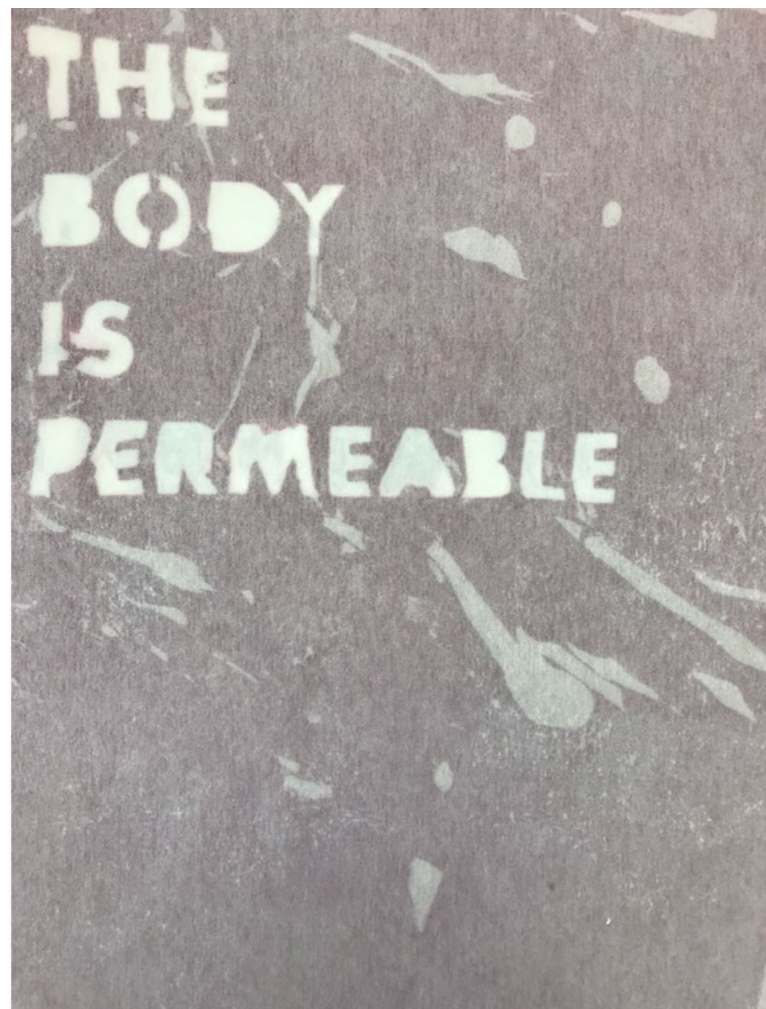


Fig. 11 Trial blowout page for *this is a ritual* pt. I (the book) in the wet stage

### III. The Statue

The upside-down tree is a sadistic reply to the habitual childish question, ‘what would happen if a tunnel to the other side of the earth were dug below my feet?’ The world loses its center; that is, it has no meaning or direction (we are lost there) because its imaginary seat is inverted..

-Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, *A User's Guide to Entropy*

The grotto beneath and within the mountain is like the heavens above and beyond; and inside the confines of the mountain, heavenly bodies mark out the space and time of another universe. They do so according to their own scale and rhythm: night is turned into day, inside becomes outside, and generations elapse in the space of instants.

-Franciscus Verellen, *The Beyond Within: Grotto-Heavens (Dongtian ) In Taoist Ritual and Cosmology*

Over winter break we make the 2 hour drive to Chattanooga after a neurologist appointment in Atlanta that I've been waiting for for months. It's a simple and effective plan of task then reward – I will follow the soul sucking experience of a doctor's office visit, which I have grown to violently detest, with a 3 ½ hour spelunking tour in the extensive caving systems near Chattanooga, TN. When we enter with our guide, it's onto the cavern's walking path – concrete infrastructure that winds through different formations lit up by neon colored lights for dramatic effect. It feels something like being in the inversion of a black light mini-golf course, and if you decide on a “walking tour” (children under 12 welcome) this is the route you will take. At an unsuspecting spot on this path, our guide stops and points to a crevice no larger than 3 ft. wide. This is the entrance to the caving system we will enter and explore for the next 3 ½ hours. She says that panic at the prospect of entering this slot is usually a good indicator of whether people can handle the rest of the tour. A couple of hours of winding through the caverns and it becomes clear why. At one point, called “the pancake”, we are belly crawling between a slit so narrow that we have to keep our head tilted with one side of our face sliding against the same rock we are up against with our stomachs. Pulling myself forward with my arms, I hear one of the two other people on our tour behind me saying “oh my god, oh my god, oh my god,” over and over again. I know roughly how far behind me he is from the last time I saw him, but the sound of his voice makes the distance between us incomprehensible. SomaaAvetimes he sounds like a far off echo and the next second I feel him right next to me, his voice coming through the rock and up against my face. “Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god.”



Fig. 12 Detail of this is a ritual, pt. III (the statue)

We crawl through a series of small tunnels and passageways before coming upon Waterfall Dome, a cavernous space with a small stream of water that trickles into a shallow pool. The ceiling is so high that we have to tip our heads all the way back for the light from our headlamps to hit it.

In the big cavern, our guide asks if we want to shut off our lights and experience “total darkness”. As soon as we click them off, the walls, floors, pool, and our bodies disappear from view. The absence of light doesn’t feel like an emptiness., Rather, it is thick and full, wrapping around me. I wave my hand in front of my eyes over and over again trying to figure out what the sensation is of not being able to see my own body while still knowing that it is there. In the same way that during a migraine light often feels like it is piercing through my eye and out the back of my head like a knife, the darkness has an overwhelming presence. It isn’t painful, but it feels forceful somehow, like a massive beast that has swallowed us all up together inside of it. When I hear the sounds of the others breathing, and the steady trickle of the waterfall, I have to focus hard to discern that the noises aren’t coming from me.

When we emerge from Raccoon Caverns, it is almost to the minute 3 ½ hours after we entered. The sky is grey and still but the ground is wet., It seems to have rained while we were in the cave. I cannot believe that this surface and sky that feel so foreign, almost like we have just teleported to it, exist alongside the world we were just enveloped in. I feel like I’ve exited from the real back into a simulation, where the sterility and fluorescence of doctors offices is normal. I immediately long to be back in the cave. And after this point, I will regularly dream of returning to that mysterious depth and distortion of sound and light, body invisible and face against rock in the belly of the earth. (12/27/2024)



Fig. 13 Three figures stand by the opening to Waterfall Dome inside Raccoon Caverns, TN



Fig. 14, Fig.15 Photos taken inside Raccoon Caverns, TN



*this is a ritual, pt. III (the statue)*, a lumpy blue form made of concrete and paper, peels and crackles like a snake shedding its skin. Embedded within its surface are seashells, collected by my brother Dan from the shores of Portland, Maine, and sent to me by post. Surrounding its base is a layer of dirt and small pieces of worn down blue glass. One participant of the ritual interacts with the statue by taking two pieces of glass, one for themselves and one for the other person, who they will rejoin to play the game. To complete the ritual, both participants will eventually take the pieces of glass and place them outside the gallery on a chalk line, which mirrors the formation of the four sculptures inside, and marks the continuation of the magic circle.<sup>9</sup>

At its center, the statue has a cave-like opening, its threshold lined with patinated brass that continues to shift and change through oxidation. The form itself is marked by numerous pockets and vessel-like structures, each holding a gelatinous mixture, not quite liquid or solid, invoking with its materiality an in-between state. The pedestal, echoing the statue's grotto-like form, also features brass-lined cavities. Surrounding these openings, pockets coated in beeswax cradle a blue liquid infused with herbal tinctures that are used to treat chronic migraines and inflammation.

The statue and its pedestal draw from the architecture of caves and grottoes, historically recognized as sacred sites for ritual and devotion—spaces that exist in-between, and mark a threshold between worlds. Caves and grottoes have long been gendered as feminine, imagined as sites of birth, creation, and transformation. Their depths, shrouded in darkness and mystery, have historically been linked to the womb, a space in which the body exists before fixed identity. The human imagination, steeped in fear of the unknown, ties these spaces to liminality, positioning them at the fragile boundary between life

<sup>9</sup> Whether it's gathering materials for preparation, kneeling before an altar, or bowing to the ground in reverence, the act of bending down to pick something up is deeply connected to ritual practice. Dan's act of collecting the glass and sending it to me becomes both a ritual preparation and a ritual in itself. Lifting the shells from the earth, changing their position, and reintegrating them into the statue imbues them with new meaning and marks an exchange between us. Future participants will take a piece from the statue, and replicate the act of bending down to further define the magic circle's boundaries.

and death, and between self and other. Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject helps to illuminate this association: like the maternal body, the cave is a space where the distinctions between subject and object dissolve. Just as the corpse confronts us with the material reality of death, the cavernous void unsettles by reminding us of our own instability, our origins in formlessness, and our inevitable return to it. The fear of the cave, then, mirrors the fear of the maternal body's generative and dissolving power, an anxiety rooted in Western conceptions of order that demand clear boundaries between self and world.<sup>10</sup>

Caves and grottoes, as natural formations and as sites of ritual, inherently distort our perceptions of time. Inside a cave, time slows and expands, external markers of day and night disappear, and sound behaves unpredictably and in ways that uproot the body from linear experience. This temporal disorientation aligns with the liminality of both ritual space and chronic illness, where participants step outside of ordinary rhythms to enter a suspended and transitional state where time feels stretched, cyclic, or even collapsed.

The materials surrounding the statue further embody these layered experiences of time. At the statue's base, mounds of soft and rounded pieces of glass accumulate. For broken glass to become the frosted forms that we call sea glass, it takes between 20 and 30 years of oceanic movement. This pile of glass was made in a rock tumbler, each batch taking about 4 days. Whereas the shells collected by my brother and the drops of herbal medicine in the statue's wax lined pockets signify a time that resists compression and insists upon a certain slowness and presence, the glass material expresses an extreme compression of time. This juxtaposition highlights a tension between natural and artificial rhythms that, in part, characterizes the everyday instability inherent in the way we experience time.<sup>11</sup> By directing participants to use the pieces of glass to further delineate the ritual space, this installation reflects the way rituals, cave sites, and chronic illness fracture linear time and make room for alternative ways of experiencing duration.

<sup>10</sup> Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of horror: An essay of abjection*. New York, New York : Columbia University Press, 1984.

<sup>11</sup> The color of light affects our bodies natural sleep cycles to varying degrees. Artificial light from electronics, known commonly as "blue light", triggers the body to suppress melatonin and has the biggest impact on our circadian rhythms.

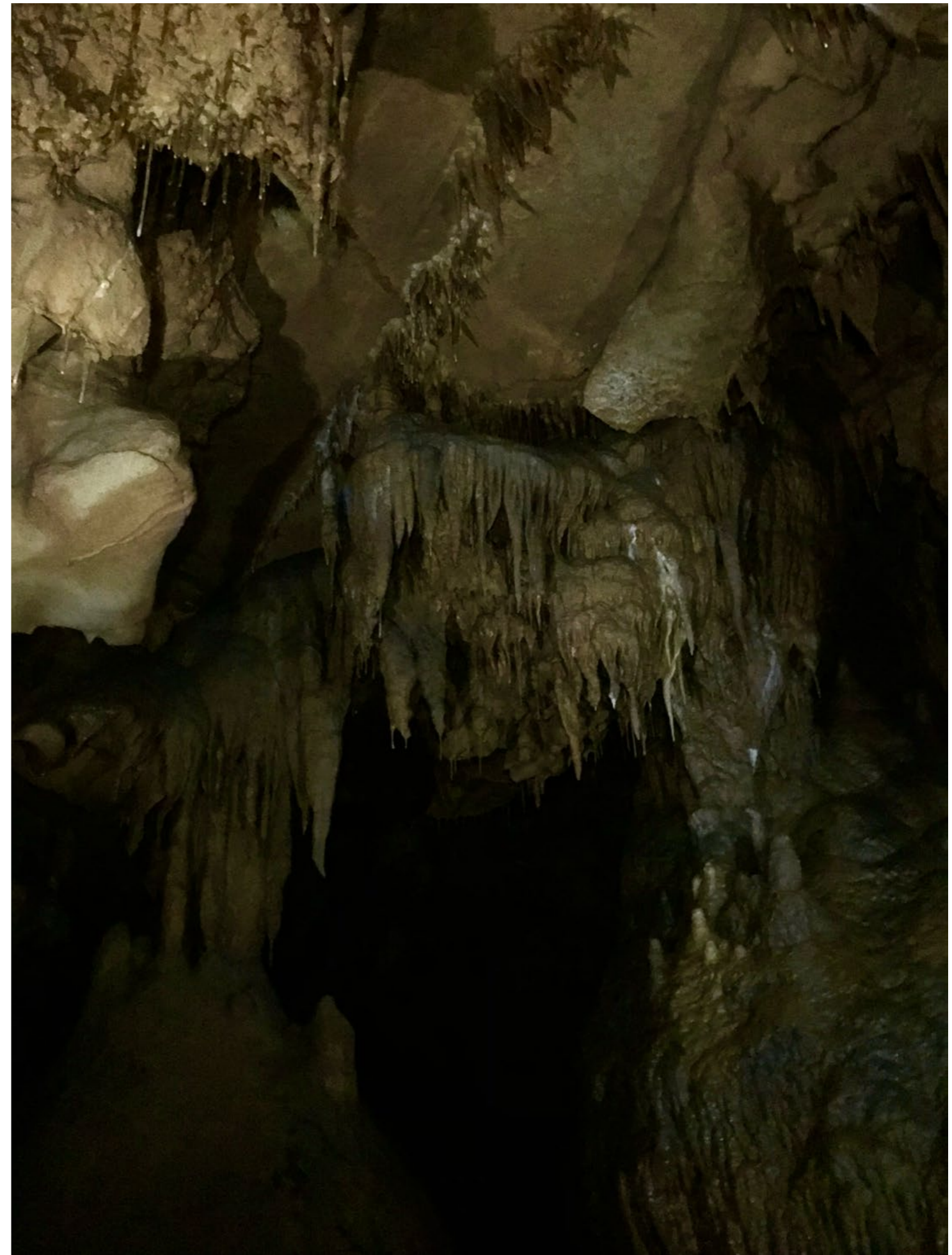


Fig. 16 Photo taken inside Raccoon Caverns, TN

## IV. The Game

v

I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop,  
They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me.  
-Walt Whitman, Song of Myself, 27

Ritual is seriousness at its highest and holiest. Can it nevertheless be play? We began by saying that all play, both of children and of grown-ups, can be performed in the most perfect seriousness. Does this go so far as to imply that play is still bound up with the sacred emotion of the sacramental act?  
-Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens

*I was 7, I moved with my mother and her boyfriend to Florida for a 9 month period. We left in the middle of the school year, the three of us made the drive down from Northern Vermont, without stopping, squished together in the cab of a small pickup truck. As the smallest, I was made to sit in the middle of the three seats, able to quickly move my legs out of the way whenever there was a need to shift gears. I remember as we drove further and further south and the weather became hotter, the smell and feeling of our unwashed bodies pressed against each other grew more present. The un-air conditioned and rumbling truck, the peanut butter my mom was hastily making bagel sandwiches with, crumbs, our sweat – everything was oily, dirty, hot, loud and mingling together to create a sensation of not being able to unstick my body from the surrounding environment of the truck cab. When we finally arrived in Florida, after what felt like weeks<sup>12</sup>, my mind was blown by the experience of the ocean, the smells, and the feeling of openness and sky, all so different from the dense woods in Northern Vermont.*

*(When I reflect on the next part of this story, I know that I'm telling it to you in the first person, but I feel like I'm also telling it about someone else, as the memory feels somewhat constructed from hearing others retell it to me so many times.)*

*One day, while playing at the beach, I found a scattering of jellyfish washed up on the sand, and while unattended and wandering, I started to collect them all into a pile. When my mother looked down at me on the beach after not seeing me for a while, she saw me sitting with my legs outstretched, covered in blue blobs, taking the jellyfish one by one and sticking them onto my skin. She has always said her immediate panic was from the initial misunderstanding that I was covering my body in beach trash. After returning from the beach that day, my legs broke out in a terrible, burning rash from the toxins of the jellyfish. I was bedridden on the couch for over a week, draining Capri Sun juice packs and going in and out of a fevered sleep. I think I remember that part most clearly. Laying on the couch in this strange place and looking down at my legs, which appeared burned and red and blotchy all over, and thinking of them as separate from my body—unattached to the rest of me. This was maybe my first experience, without being able to articulate it, with understanding that my body was a permeable thing. My first (remembered) experience with material experimentation, with wanting to fuse with other entities, and with feeling the strangeness of being in my own form. (??/??/1995)*

<sup>12</sup> The drive from the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont to Miami, Florida is 25 hours.



Fig. 17 Studio reflection captured in *this is a ritual, pt. IV (the game)*



Fig. 18 Ash from burned hair after firing in glass kiln, University of Vermont Chemistry Dept.



Fig. 19, Fig. 20 Ash from hair (burned by collecting in a paint can and burying in a bonfire) collected in a test tube and close-up photo of burned hair





Fig. 21 Annalee Pickett creating a marble out of glass and ash, University of Georgia Scientific Glass Blowing Shop

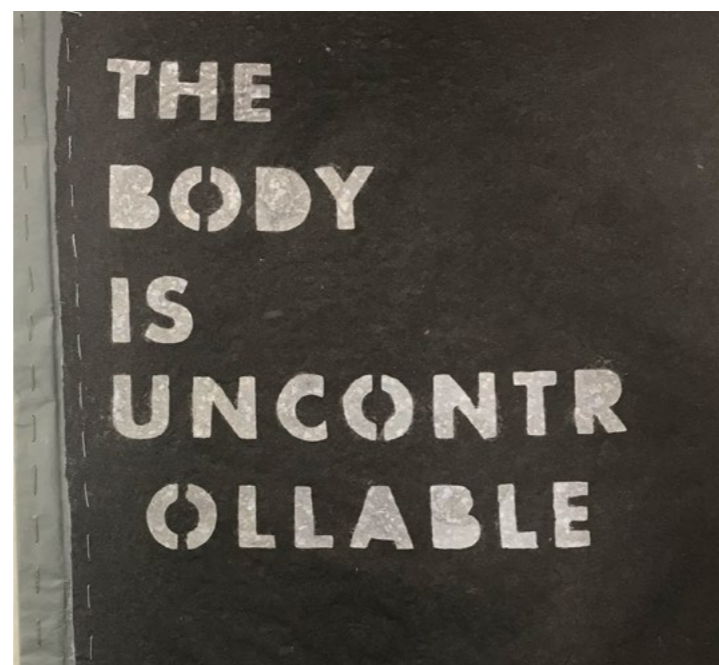


Fig. 22 Detail of text blowout page in *this is a ritual, pt I (the book)*

*this is a ritual, pt. IV (the game)* consists of a large barrel filled with water, inside which a smaller bowl floats on the surface. The floating bowl features a raised central structure shaped like a cross or an “X,” that divides its interior into four quadrants that remain partially connected by a channel that runs around the circumference. Within this bowl are four glass marbles, their movements dictated by the shifting balance of the floating vessel. Participants manipulate the bowl’s motion using attached strings and working together with the aim of separating the marbles into the four quadrants. Their efforts, however, are inevitably undone. The marbles roll back together as the bowl tilts and sways, unable to permanently separate from each other and never settling into a fixed state.

While participants play, sound from the bell previously rung by one of them is emitted from within the game’s pedestal. The distorted sound permeates the space where they stand, creating an auditory ripple that mirrors the water’s constant movement. The pedestal itself is sheathed in patinated brass, a surface that remains in flux, shifting in color and texture over time as it undergoes continuous oxidation.

The marbles in this game are made of hand blown glass with inclusions of ash material taken from my burned hair. In the directions for the game (written in *this is a ritual, pt. I (the book)*), participants are asked to “look into the water together”. The pool of water functions like a mirror. But unlike a traditional mirror, it is interwoven with material elements and disrupted by the distortion of sound. Control of the body and an image of the fixed self become impossible. Layering the reflections seen in the water with the material of the ash ties the act of looking at oneself to decay and transformation.<sup>13</sup> The connection between the present reflection and the remnants of a past body reinforces a nonlinear experience of time—one which is multiplied by the delayed dissonance created by an instrument that has already been played and set to rest.

The reality that I experience during extreme moments of pain and illness is the singular and peculiar feeling of both being and not being in my physical form. It is a presence and absence, and a disconnection to outside surroundings that includes a simultaneous disorientation to my interiority. Ultra-sensitivity to sound and light,

<sup>13</sup> The myth of Narcissus, from Greek mythology, tells of a beautiful youth, so enamored with himself that he rejected all who loved him. As punishment, the gods caused him to fall in love with his own reflection in a pool of water. Unable to look away, he eventually wasted away and died, sometimes said to have transformed into the narcissus flower.

brain fog, loss of temperature control, and blurred vision all contribute to a feeling of separation from the world and also from myself. These moments can become almost psychedelic<sup>14</sup> in their distortion of the world around me. The mediator for experiencing the world during these moments, my body, becomes strange, alien, and other.

It is impossible, in this game, to see yourself without seeing the other; seeing another person reflected across from you, seeing your own image in a rippling reflection, seeing a body in the form of glass encased ash. Through its transformation into game pieces, the body becomes an object to be manipulated and controlled. The marbles are my self, the marbles are the other. Separating and controlling the different parts of the body by way of separating the four marbles is ultimately a futile gesture.

<sup>14</sup> Sophie Strand’s writing on chronic illness argues that prolonged experiences of pain are similar to psychedelic experiences. She describes her long-term relationship with the light on the walls of her bedroom: “I learned light that year. Second by second the slight gradations in color staining the wall opposite my bed. Anemic lavender in spring dusk. Dusty red sunsets in July. I learned about how the Valley around me inhaled and exhaled pollen-plush wind into my room on a scale much slower than my own agitated respiration.”



Fig. 23 Detail of text blowout page and drawing in *this is a ritual, pt I (the book)*

## V. The Body

We people say: I, and my body. One of the things that separates us from animals is that minute, momentary distance between I and my body. The body is the form to which we must relate and the vessel that carries us through life. The body is the house of the self, the dwelling of the soul. But the body can also be our prison and our burden. I, and my body. In between the two is a gap filled with riddles and secrets, darkness and promise. Out of that gap, or incision, or wound, grow songs and stories, religions, dreams, and discoveries.

-Anna-Karin Palm, *The Body and Its Stories: Thoughts on Francesca Woodman's Photography*

Rooted in both capitalism and white supremacy is the sort of fantasy of immortality that if you are clean enough, if you are self-contained enough, if you are self managed enough, if you buy the right things in the right ways, you'll live forever.

-Hannah McGregor, *Material Girls Podcast "Goblin Mode x the Abject"*

I just want you to know, no matter what you do, you're gonna die, just like everybody else.

-Olympia Dukakis as Rose in *Moonstruck* (1987)



Fig. 24 Glass marble with ash inclusions, fabricated by Annalee Pickett, University of Georgia Scientific Glass Blowing Shop



Fig. 25, Fig 26 Bathing with a paper cast of the ground, April 2024, Athens, GA

Each object in this installation is both a vessel and a process, shaped by time and transformation, and imbued with its own ritual agency. The bell, the statue, the book, and the game do not merely occupy space, they are actors within it. They change, decay, reverberate, and ripple. Each material undergoes its own ritual, shifting through cycles of breakdown and becoming. In this way, the installation itself is not just a representation of ritual, but an active, living system of ritual. It is a choreography of transformation where materials, bodies, and time converge.

Ritual, in its essence, is about negotiating change. It is a way of moving through thresholds, between life and death, between self and other, between the known and the unknown. In making the magic circle formed by these objects, I am hinting at an alternative cosmology that does not seek permanence, purity, or containment, but rather embraces the messiness of being, the inevitability of entropy, and the interconnectedness of all living and non-living matter. This cosmology is one that moves beyond rigid and hierarchical structures that separate body and mind, self and world, human and non-human.

Decay, disorientation, and illness are not only conditions of being alive, they are exciting sites for discovery – places to inhabit and explore the entanglement with time, material, and the bodies of others. This ritual refuses the logic of purity and permanence, and honors the activating forces of permeability, instability, and interdependence. The ritual concludes with a game that does not resolve in victory or completion. The marbles do not stay in place, the circle does not close neatly. Instead, the work leaves the participant suspended in the in-between, floating in the riddle of “I, and my body,” living in the space where the self dissolves and reforms again and again.



Fig. 27 *this is a ritual, pt. I (the book)*, circle detail on pedestal

Fig. 28 *this is a ritual, pt. IV (the game)* pedestal detail of patinated brass



Fig. 29 collection of frosted “sea” glass, made in rock tumbler, Athens, GA



Fig. 30 Back cover of this is a ritual, pt. I (the book), made from a cast of the ground outside of Thomas St. Studios #103 in Athens, GA, with embedded glass and seashells sent from Dan in Portland, Maine

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Fig. 31v Photo taken in Raccoon Caverns, TN

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