# Sick at Art

**Sophie J Williamson stresses the importance of an individual's subjective sovereignty over their productive value, calling for collective creative resistance to capitalist pressure to conform to the state's mechanisms of exhaustion and slow death.**

I started to write this while many were attending Frieze London art fair, perhaps rushing from a VIP breakfast to a meeting with the director of that big, important museum or from the performance of the latest art-world darling, jostling through the crowds of collectors to get to the cocktail reception or dinner to schmooze with the all the right people. Small talk in the art world, meanwhile, revolves around projects, events, commissions, prizes, sales, exhibitions and travel, conversations opening with, 'What have you been up to?' and 'What are you working on?'. No matter how sincerely intended, these questions nevertheless represent a kind of tallying, a social audit of output.

While all this was going on, I was lying on my sofa, my legs elevated against the wall. For over two years now, emails and invitations have remained mostly unanswered, funding applications and project proposals have fallen into insignificance; the pace of my life, once organised by deadlines, openings and travel, has shifted to counting the length of a breath: in for four, hold for four, out for eight; the rhythm of my day, regulating my constantly exhausted body. What Elizabeth Freeman calls 'chrononormativity' – 'the use of time to organise individual human bodies toward maximum productivity' – organises the art world and the world alike. Our lives become synchronised to deadlines and milestones, tethered to the fiction that a good life and a successful career advances in steady, productive increments. Dana Luciano extends this to 'chronobiopolitics', the way whole populations are disciplined into reproductive and economic timelines, calibrated towards growth and accumulation. Capitalism does not only extract labour; it colonises tempo, rewarding bodies that keep pace with its accelerations and marking those who fall out of sync as failing, lagging, unproductive. I, however, can no longer perform according to this capitalist work/life schedule. As harrowing as it has been – and I by no means romanticise disability – it has felt like an abrupt liberation from an unsustainable regime of speed. The chronobiopolitical demand for constant acceleration had simply become impossible for me to meet. Conversely, as disability scholar Ellen Samuels writes, 'Crip time is time travel', a disorienting warp of pauses, regressions, ruptures and detours – not the curated slowness of wellness culture, but a temporal life shaped by limits, pain and unpredictability. Crip time is neither a retreat nor a lifestyle; it is a survival practice in a world that measures value by output, and a quiet rebellion against the chronobiopolitical demand to move ever faster.

Artists have long intuited this politics of tempo. For Mierle Laderman Ukeles, whose *Maintenance Art*, 1969–, reframed cleaning and care as artistic labour, time itself becomes political, structured by gender, class and dependence. Tehching Hsieh's year-long durational performances, such as *Time Clock Piece*, 1980–81, and *Outdoor Piece*, 1981–82, make visible the endurance required simply to exist within capitalist time. Maria Eichhorn's *5 Weeks, 25 Days, 175 Hours* for London's Chisenhale Gallery in 2016 closed the institution and


Finnegan Shannon, *Do you want us here or not*, 2018–

suspended art workers' production altogether, exposing the entanglement of time, value and work. Adelita Husni-Bey's pedagogical projects, such as *The Reading/ La Seduta*, 2017, build collective learning spaces that slow down the circulation of knowledge, gesturing towards post-growth social imaginaries. Carolina Caycedo's *Be Dammed* project similarly maps the temporal and environmental violence of extractivism, connecting ecological damage to economies of speed. Together, these practices insist that the slow activity of getting through the day is never neutral, revealing instead the deep inequities of who controls time, and who is controlled by it.

Within this wider fabric of temporal cultural critique, 'slowness' has long been a watchword, a resistance to acceleration, a call for care and a gesture aligned with the principles of degrowth. Yet as the artist Flora Parrott reminded me recently, '*choosing* slowness is a privilege'. Her work is often developed in fragments – spare moments caught on commuter train journeys or in the quiet after her children's bedtime – as it emerges from the interstices of daily life and, out of necessity, it materialises over extended periods. Slowness is too often romanticised by those who can pick it up and put it down, marketed as a lifestyle choice by wellness retreats and self-help podcasts. For those living with energy-limiting conditions, however, slowness is not chosen. Yet in this forced desynchronisation, our bodies insist on a counter-tempo, a different measure of worth or what Freeman calls 'temporal drag', the body dragging its heels against the machinery of acceleration.

In this drag, I recognise the politics of refusal, a critique of the capitalist 'dogma of work', described in books from Paul Lafargue's 1883 polemic *The Right To Be Lazy* through to Mark Fisher's 2009 *Capitalist Realism* (Books *AM*333), which urged us to look for cracks in capitalism through which imagination might re-enter. More recently, this critique can be found in contemporary black feminist thought, such as the liberation-through-rest articulated by Tricia Hersey in *Rest is Resistance*, 2022, which directly challenges the legacies of exploitation. In this philosophical unfolding, developed alongside the acceleration of capitalist growth, rest is not recuperation for re-entry; it is a breach. A pause that is neither idle nor indulgent, but a small act of sovereignty. To stop – because one must – becomes to stop the world, even briefly, from claiming me as fuel. In the shadow of Achille Mbembe's 'necropolitics', such pauses can even be read as moments of withdrawal from the state's mechanisms of exhaustion and slow death, as acts of survival and subjective sovereignty beyond productive value.

**Against the hyperactive metabolism of the art world, El Morgan proposes an alternative tempo, one in which illness, rest, error and hesitation are not interruptions but conditions of making.**

At the start of this year, after a long period of illness, artist El Morgan sent an email to her mailing list, sharing a 47-second-long video work, *Wildlife Photographer of the Year*. 'I made this video last summer. After that, I made nothing at all until yesterday,' she wrote, 'One of my children became ill, I became ill and then sadly my mum died … [I] had fantasies of continuing to make work in my studio. This did not happen.' When I received her email, I had already been sick and unproductive for 18 months. It landed like a gesture of solidarity, an artist holding space for non-productivity, for the grief at the loss of one's productivity, and for the quiet forms of life that continue beneath collapse. Her words were a reminder that minimal production is not absence but also not a stance to be romanticised; for people like us, the work of getting by, of tending to what remains possible, is not an aesthetic choice. The unashamed honesty of the message landed like a radical counter to the productivity-focused culture that most of us are anxious to keep up with. Morgan proposes that doing less is neither deficit nor withdrawal; it becomes a form of degrowth, a recalibration of value away from output and towards endurance. Her email continued, 'then winter came, and I still didn't make anything'. By capturing her lack of productivity and refusal to disguise non-making as pause, Morgan offers an aesthetic of reduction that refuses acceleration's false vitality.

This sensibility comes into sharp focus in Morgan's *Have you had a productive day?*, 2023–, which captures scenes of interdependence between human and nonhuman: children playing with a spider or the slow spread of fungal growth. These small negotiations that happen between species, taking place in car parks and living rooms, present ordinary spaces as being rich with interactions worthy of our attention. The title lingers like an irritant, a phrase so common it slips into the mundane, the polite micro-violence of capitalist small talk. Morgan turns the question inwards and outwards at once, using it to probe how self-worth is tethered to output. As the camera focuses on the daily lives of invertebrates that inhabit her shared local environment – worms, moths, beetles, spiders, hoverfly larvae – we see lives viscerally entangled by digestion, reproduction and movement; the work suggests that to be alive is to already be productive enough.

Against the hyperactive metabolism of the art world, Morgan proposes an alternative tempo, one in which illness, rest, error and hesitation are not interruptions but conditions of making. Through the practice of small gestures – filming a spider, drawing a plant, going for a walk – Morgan embodies an ethics of sufficiency, countering the cultural demand to keep producing even through illness. This is the politics of getting by, asserting that the act of survival is itself creative: an ecological and bodily realism that recognises self-preservation as a form of making. Against


El Morgan, *Have you had a productive day?*, 2023, video


Sop, *We Year*, 2024–25

the mainstream ideology of growth, Morgan's work asks what art might look like if it were modelled not on expansion but on a collaboration with entropy and care — slow, irregular, persistent, enough.

I'm still learning the limits of my new body. It involves lying down – a lot. I lie on the bathroom floor, in hospital waiting rooms, train station platforms and pavements; legs raised to calm my racing heart, to gather the energy to move again. My mother, often beside me as I can't travel alone, blushes and apologises in response to the inevitable puzzled or accusatory looks from strangers. But I feel a strange liberation in it: an insistence that my body deserves space, that it cannot and will not contort to fit an ableist environment that assumes endless mobility. Urban architectures reorder themselves through this need: my local streets demarked by pre-planned pit-stops – tree stumps, ledges, a grass verge, the graveyard behind my flat, neighbours' walls – when I can't make it the length of my road, I power down wherever the body insists.

Brooklyn-based artist Shannon Finnegan experiences the world through a similar lens, where every threshold becomes either an obstacle or a refuge, a place that either drains or replenishes. Their practice begins with the simple, radical premise that rest is a form of resistance. Working through text-based installations, drawings and furniture, Finnegan creates spaces that acknowledge disabled experience and fatigue, inviting rest not as withdrawal but as an act of access, agency and determination to be acknowledged. Their somewhat iconic bench series invites rest, but not the passive kind offered by park benches or the discreet quiet corners of museums. Inscribed with phrases of nonconformity – 'This exhibition has asked me to stand for too long. Sit if you agree.' – they transform sitting into critique. Within institutions structured around acts of endurance, which require hours of walking and standing, Finnegan's benches disrupt the assumption that all bodies can or should keep up. Rest here is not retreat but resistance: a demand that fatigue, pain and access needs be acknowledged in spaces that habitually erase them. In Finnegan's hands, the bench becomes both a compassionate offering and an embodied manifesto, a quiet intervention that reimagines participation and protest. To rest becomes to resist the pace and posture demanded by institutions as well as, more broadly, the daily pressures of society. To sit on Finnegan's bench is to agree, to align oneself with a politics of access and care. The simplicity of the bench – an open invitation to sit – conceals a profound challenge: that care and rest are not indulgences, but radical necessities.

The past two years have been a huge learning curve; much of the social and professional network that I previously took for granted, embedded in the art world's rhythm of openings, parties, events and international travel, dissipated overnight. But new, deeply meaningful relationships quickly materialised: friends, peers and acquaintances who have lived longer in this realm of slow practice reached out offering support and gentle friendship that I didn't yet know I needed. Of course, I had consumed curatorial programmes about the politics of care, publications and symposia over the past years; and I had been involved in institutional policymaking covering disabilities, safeguarding and care. But I had experienced these as subject matter and responsibility, the current urgent zeitgeist directing my attention. But in a sick body, I found a new profound admiration for our creative community; previously hidden to me behind theoretical frameworks, suddenly I was part of active social relations based on genuine enacted care, empathy, reciprocity and mutual aid.

Artist James Leadbitter teaching me gentle crip socialising when on zero 'spoons' (to borrow Christine Miserandino's analogy, commonly used among the crip community to measure and communicate one's energy as it depletes during the day), consistently picking me up in their car and sitting silently on the beach; or researcher Ayesha Keshani sharing mobility recommendations; or arts fundraiser Phoebe Apollo helping me navigate the (totally inaccessible) benefits system; or curator Bori Soos showing me around their exhibition over a video call, understanding the experiences that I was missing before I even realised it myself (I sobbed all the way through). The list goes on. I was a rabbit in the headlights, no idea how to live in a crip body; and even less of a clue as to how to continue a creative practice when it was still a daily struggle to manage the basics of survival. People who were friends or acquaintances in the past, suddenly felt like a family carrying me through.

Before becoming sick, I had been trying to arrange a studio visit with London-based artist, Sop. Once I too was sick though, navigating both of our unpredictable bodies, it took almost a year to coordinate a Zoom call; a timescale that would rarely be humoured in the fast pace of institutional programme turnover. The kinship was immediate. I sobbed with relief to hear someone articulate the grief I felt at the loss of my practice and the severance from a professional identity. And Sop's generosity of character – as with so many crip artists – seeps through their work. Materialising from a period of relapse when Sop was confined largely to bed and housebound, able to work only for brief stretches, the work *We Year*, 2024–25, transforms the condition of

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chronic illness into a language of form, rhythm and attention. The piece is built from fragments: new footage shot indoors is combined with archival material, recorded on Hi8, mini DV, iPhone and 16mm film, as well as early home videos, all of which merge with recent glimpses of domestic light and shadow. Time unsettles its usual markers of progress and recovery, at once compressed and dilated. Flickering, pulsating vertical bars, referencing the energy-monitoring display of a Garmin watch worn to track fluctuating energy levels, translate the constant – yet largely invisible to others – labour of monitoring, pacing and budgeting activity. The bars function both as a heartbeat – translating the liveable boundaries of illness – and as a barrier between artist and the viewer, partially obscuring the footage beneath, 'like closed curtains on the sun', as Sop puts it. 'I look at the bars, always looking at the bars,' the voice-over confides. 'Refresh, check, refresh.' Recurring imagery of filtered light through blinds, through the haze of exhaustion, the sunlight refracted, becomes an index of presence and a way of measuring life through brief intervals of perception.

The work originates from the essay 'I am writing I am we', a text composed, as the artist writes, 'until my battery runs out'. The text forms the film's voice-over: a slow, rhythmic essay in which a day becomes a year, and a year becomes something thicker and more strange. This is a work made from within illness – not about it, but *inside* it – unfolding at the pace of limited energy, with the camera and the voice tracing the uneven pulse of the body's own energy supply, its fluctuating charge and depletion. 'A day is a year,' Sop writes, 'but also a year is still a year, but the years now are full full full to bursting with nothing.' Rather than seek productivity, the film stays with the repetitions of self-care, boredom and inertia: the 'bed to sofa to kitchen to toilet daily dance', as Sop describes it, becomes the choreography of the slow, looping movement of a body confined yet creative. This is not the time of productivity or progress, but of a body learning to live in an alternate temporality shaped by fatigue, stasis, relapse, unpredictability and constant adaptation. As with Morgan's newsletters and Finnegan's benches, *We Year* transforms the apparent stasis of illness into an aesthetic of attentiveness, a mode of working that looks again, deeper, precisely because it cannot move quickly: art made in negotiation with the body's limits. The film's title, collapsing 'we' and 'year', crystallises its temporal philosophy: time stretched, shared and transformed through community and rest. The phrase 'We are a year / We year / We are rest / We rest' closes the film like a mantra, transforming solitude into collective endurance. It enacts a quiet solidarity, where even rest becomes shared action.

And yet, even as artists like Morgan, Sop and Finnegan remake forced slow tempo as aesthetic and political form, the gravitational pull of production remains strong. I notice myself clinging to institutional affiliations like life rafts. These structures offer support, but they also function as cover, as a way to reassure others (and myself) that I am still 'working'. The shame that rises when I consider saying, truthfully, 'I made nothing', reveals how deeply chrononormativity embeds itself. I find myself narrating rest as research, collapse as methodology, pacing as practice, as though rest only becomes legitimate when it can be translated into something recognisable within art-world rhetoric.

Most days, I simply lie on the sofa, legs raised, staring out the window. Hours pass in blank suspension: no thinking, no refining, no conceptual drift, not even dreaming towards future work. It is a stand-by mode, a quiet presentness. It is not the cultivated slowness of wellness culture, nor the radical rest Hersey calls us towards as liberation, though I feel kinship with her insistence. It is something more inert, and perhaps more dangerous to capitalism's sensibility: rest without promise. I am not accruing value; I am not 'becoming'. And yet, this stillness feels like meaning. Sop's *We Year* shows us a temporality of survival, not in order to return but simply to continue. Finnegan's benches insist that sitting – refusing to move – is participation, not absence. Morgan reminds us that non-making can itself be a practice of honesty and solidarity. Perhaps the most unruly gesture, then, is not to aestheticise or instrumentalise rest, but to let it remain useless. To accept, without translation or defence, the hours where we do nothing but breathe. To live the question that crip theory has always held open: what value remains when value is no longer measured? A practice that, like the artists who have held me, suggests that sometimes the work is not to make, but simply to remain. To lie down. To stay alive. To year.

El Morgan's films can be viewed at elflix.net.

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