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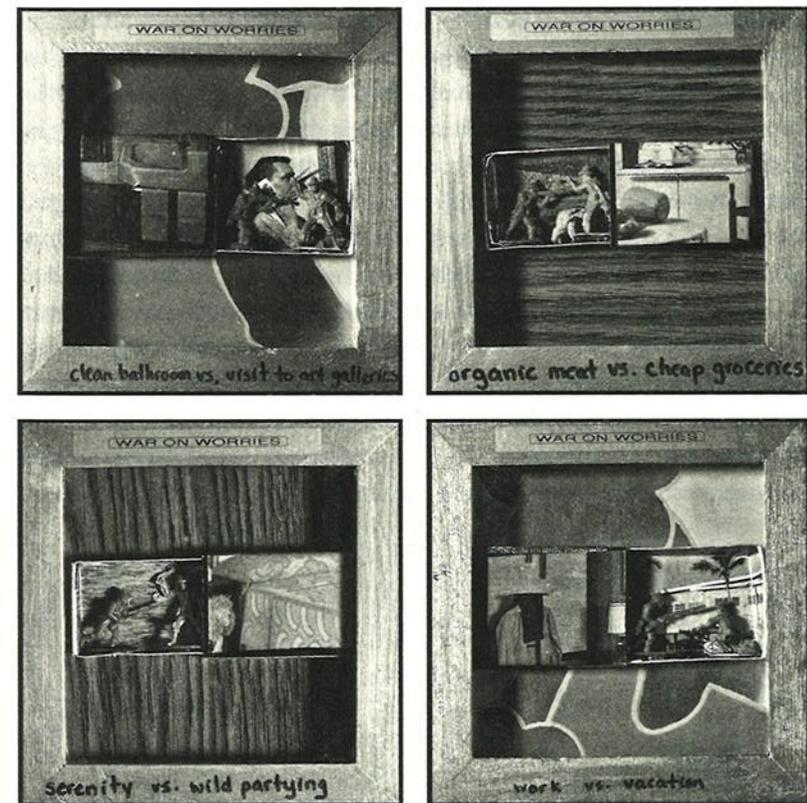
The Utopia of Ordinary Habit

Crafting, Creativity, and Spiritual Practice

DEPRESSION IS ORDINARY

The series of collaged shadow boxes called *War on Worries* by the visual artist Allyson Mitchell makes public the personal anxieties that claim our attention at the same time as we're worrying about war and social change (figure 3.1). Two plastic toy soldiers fight it out inside the confines of a matchbox, which is mounted on a background of fluorescent print wallpaper from the 1970s that recalls the home front. Scrawled on the silver frames in the style of a things-to-do list are labels that structure the war on worries as a series of decisions to be made: organic meat vs. cheap groceries; clean bathroom vs. visit to art galleries; serenity vs. wild partying; work vs. vacation; casserole in front of TV vs. outdoor picnic; suburban background vs. urban present; periodical upkeep vs. antipoverty actions. These conflicts of desire show the difference in scale between our political goals and what we're actually feeling and create public space for the small anxieties that keep us preoccupied but so often go underground. (I say "we" because I recognize myself in the demographic niche named here.) In her craft aesthetic of collage and glue gun, Mitchell takes up the tools of both high modernism and the stay-at-home housewife; it's a style that has lately been revitalized not only by Martha Stewart and her kind but also by hipster white girls bent on making domesticity both twisted and fun.

Mitchell's work encapsulates in visual form what depression looks like when it is taken up as a Public Feelings project. Capturing the incommensurability of everyday feelings and what's going on in the world, she suggests that, while the link between worry and war is often lived as a disjuncture, the "war on worries" is also a real one. She points to the centrality of ordinary life, especially middle-class domestic life (including the alternative versions practiced by artists, intellectuals,

3.1 Allyson Mitchell, *War on Worries*, 2001.

queers, and cultural creatives), to an understanding of depression. *War on Worries* is an apt description of my *Depression Journals* narrative, whose stories are frequently about the logistics of housekeeping and self-care and the everyday habits of living inside bodies and houses that are the intimate and material locations of depression. They chronicle forms of survival in the face of the challenges of daily life, which is where depression sets in and becomes chronic—or, to use a less medical term, pervasive or systemic—so much a part of things that it can't be isolated as a singular feeling or event. But by the same token, those humble material locations are also the spaces in which depression can be transformed through practices that can become the microclimate of hope.

Domesticity is thus a central keyword for Public Feelings work on depression, and an important theoretical foundation for that project has been rethinking the distinction between private and public spheres. The intimate rituals of daily life, where depression is embedded, need to be understood as a public arena, or alternatively as a semipublic sphere, that is, a location that doesn't always announce itself or get recognized as public but which nonetheless functions as such. My Public Feelings fellow traveler Kathleen (Katie) Stewart is very adept at capturing what she calls the private life of public culture, which holds out the dream of a cocoon-like domesticity as a sanctuary from the anxieties and terrors produced by economic crisis, war, and cultural conflict. But as the private life of public culture, the home becomes the soft underbelly of capitalism, a place where the current state of things is experienced through a complex range of feelings.

Home is where the heart is. You can get inside and slam the door. We dream of the big, beautiful, sensate commodity-to-live-in, the bathroom done in textures of old stone and precious metals, a utopia of colorful décor. . . .

The American dream takes the form of a still life: the little family stands beside the SUV in the driveway, looking up, stock portfolios in hand, everything insured, payments up to date, yards kept trim and tended, fat-free diet under their belts, community watch systems in place. Martha Stewart offers advice on the finishing touches.

But then the little disappearing acts start coming up right in the middle of home's retreat, adding a different charge to things. There are times when it seems as if everything the heart drags home is peppered with a hint of addiction, aloneness, something rotten or worthless.¹

We could add depression to the list of what comes home. Stewart describes domestic comfort as a deceptive structure of feeling, the buffer that keeps bad feelings at bay, but, as the pervasiveness of depression suggests, an atmosphere that is also haunted by bad feelings, by the awareness that something is wrong, either inside or outside. The sanctuary of the home is frequently pierced by sensational events, not just real ones, such as September 11, 2001, war, and racist violence, but also imagined ones, such as tabloid-style crime and celebrity news that make a spectacle of others' successes and misfortunes. (And it's not always easy to tell the difference between what's real and what's imag-

ined.) But it's also pervaded by a more low-level buzz of worry and anxiety and forms of daily stress that bog people down to the point where they're so numb or weary they can't even really pay attention to anything other than what's right in front of them.

Depression is tied to the domestic because it is ordinary, and the *ordinary* is another central concept for the Public Feelings project. My previous work on how trauma manifests itself not just in catastrophic events but in the fabric of daily life has segued into my interest in depression as a chronic or ordinary feeling. Katie Stewart's acute accounts of the domestic are part of her larger effort to write about "ordinary affects," which are "public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they're also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of."² In work that has been formative for my own, she describes the ordinary as a place of intensities, potentials, and scenes that are not best understood or described as examples of big theoretical categories. The ordinary requires new genres of ethnography or storytelling that Stewart crafts through observations and writings that range across everyday life in U.S. locations that include nuclear test sites in Nevada, West Virginia hollers, and local neighborhoods where people are out walking or stuck in traffic waiting for the lights to change or figuring out what to buy at Target or Walmart. Stewart finds immanent meaning in the ordinary, turning it into stories that are "still lives," scenes of potential that can be sensational or alive with feeling without being melodramatic.

The work of representing depression as ordinary participates in the descriptive turn that Heather Love has linked to the affective turn.³ One of the problems with medical discourses, whether about trauma or depression, is not just that they pathologize but that they homogenize and universalize a nuanced range of feelings. Along with its more technical vocabulary, the *DSM-IV*'s list of criteria for diagnosing major depressive disorder includes symptoms such as *feeling sad or empty*, *loss of interest or pleasure*, *loss of energy*, *feelings of worthlessness*, *indecisiveness*, and *recurrent thoughts of death*.⁴ The appearance of everyday speech—terms like *being slowed down* rather than *psychomotor retardation*—suggests that knowledge about how to articulate depression could come from anyone, not just medical experts, and that *depressed mood* is not a self-evident category. To the *DSM*'s proliferating list could be added lethargy, numbness, being overwhelmed, anxiety, not wanting to do anything, and other variations on the official clinical symptoms. I often use

the term *feeling bad* because its colloquial blandness is an invitation to further elaboration, which can consist in an anecdote (such as those in *The Depression Journals*) rather than a clinical category or even a theoretical term. Accounts of depression require new ways of talking about affective states and making them publicly significant rather than new terminologies. Thus while I use the word *depression* because of its widespread medical and popular use, when opened up to scrutiny under the rubric of Public Feelings the term folds into the vocabularies and stories of ordinary life. Depression lurks in a lot of different places, and rather than naming it as such I prefer to pay attention to the texture of lived experience and its complex combinations of hope and despair.

Public Feelings accounts of depression thus don't necessarily contain scientific evidence or medical diagnoses or big headlines about health epidemics. In my ordinary stories of trips to the grocery store or life at home, depression can't be labeled as a disease and can even be hard to pin down as an identifiable phenomenon. It might not immediately reveal its connections to capitalism and colonialism, even if it's a structure of feeling for how they are experienced. It's a sensational story of a different kind, literally sensational because it's about the impact of the world around us on our senses—which include our bodies, our feelings, and our minds. It can be hard to tell the difference between inside and outside—between what's inside your body and what's out there, between what's inside the house and what's outside in the neighborhood or on the other side of town, between your heartbreak and the misery in the world beyond. Teresa Brennan suggests, for example, that depression and other contemporary conditions that are hard to identify such as chronic fatigue syndrome and autoimmune disorders are forms of psychic and environmental poisoning caused by the transmission of bad feelings across bodies, people, and groups.⁵ Floating between inside and outside, depression can be a mood, an atmosphere, or a sensibility.

Depression can be everywhere as part of the insidious effects of a culture that says people should be sovereign agents but keeps weighing them down with too much (or too little) to do. This is especially true for middle-class subjects, as well as for those living within the aspirational orbit of middle-class life. *War on Worries* suggests that domestic worry is compounded by awareness of its insularity—by the anxiety of knowing that it's both barrier and buffer against other (larger) worries

and other (more real) wars. Depression stories are about people who just keep disappearing under the weight of daily life, although sometimes the feelings gather up enough force that someone goes off and it becomes a sensational story about kids, boys mostly, getting guns and killing other people or themselves—at Columbine (1999), at Virginia Tech (2007), at the University of Texas (2010), at the Safeway in Arizona (2011), at a summer camp in Norway (2011).⁶ There's a story to tell there about people who get so disconnected they have to act out, but it's a story that should hit close to home and our own experiences rather than constructing psychopaths or freaks. We don't need scientific research to explain what's going on; we need better ways of talking about ordinary life, including the dull feelings of just getting by.

ARCHIVES OF SURVIVAL

This chapter proceeds in its exploratory redescription of depression not only through alternative keywords but through a collection of cultural texts that, along with Mitchell's *War on Worries*, belong to my own idiosyncratic archive of everyday feeling and depression. This archive includes the performances of the queer cabaret artists Kiki and Herb, whose cover song medleys and diva attitude express the ordinary through the melodrama of extreme feeling. It also includes the queer AIDS activist filmmaker Gregg Bordowitz's video *Habit*, whose flat affective tone and documentary disjunctions between the U.S. and South Africa perform political depression about the ongoing global AIDS pandemic. The most extended case is the contemporary practice of feminist crafting that combines art, politics, and everyday life to rework debates about domesticity. With particular attention to the work of the visual artists Sheila Pepe and Allyson Mitchell, the chapter explores crafting as a model for creative ways of living in a depressive culture and as an ordinary form of spiritual practice that I call *the utopia of everyday habit*.

Those familiar with these artists might recognize that this archive reflects the sensibility and cultural taste of the specific demographic I inhabit: a small and frequently ephemeral niche of queer and feminist bohemia centered in downtown New York and other cosmopolitan cities such as Toronto and Chicago. Although it may be a minor or eccentric

archive, it offers further evidence that there are other archives besides the specific-turned-universal of medical perspectives (or the Western humanist tradition of melancholy), although it also has a different emphasis from the previous chapter's archive of diaspora and indigeneity. There is definitely traffic back and forth across race and class lines in queer bohemia, which shares with hipster culture a desire to connect with different worlds, even when it has its own problems with versions of "multicultural diversity" that are limited or superficial. Queer bohemia's relation to cultural mobility and aspiration and to middle-class privilege and assimilation takes many forms, especially since it includes artists with working-class origins. The work of the white artists who are my focus here often registers a depression-inducing anxiety about separation from real struggle, including anxiety about racial segregation, that *War on Worries* expresses. I wanted to see how the arty queer culture that sustains me brings a queer perspective to depression, one with a taste for the nonnormative and perverse. Living in close and sustained proximity with these artists and the feelings their work produces has been integral to my thinking about depression.

My method is not necessarily one of close reading or taking the examples as specific instances of a more general case; there's a methodological claim here about how depression, and even more importantly, survival, can be studied by collecting an archive that includes the queer arts. These cases are singularities or oddities whose contributions to our knowledge can't be predicted and don't follow conventional disciplinary boundaries. Theories of the case and the archive have been central to *Public Feelings*; my formulation of the "archive of feelings" as a critical concept is indebted, for example, to Lauren Berlant's construction of an archive that mixes high and low, queer and straight, in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*. This critical sensibility is also present in Katie Stewart's turn to description in order to prevent banal generalization, Sara Ahmed's construction of "unhappy archives" to disrupt conventional notions of happiness, and Heather Love's notion of a descriptive turn.⁷ As Ben Highmore suggests, the description of the ordinary (or depression) requires a science of the singular, which disrupts statistical or scientific understandings that operate through generalizations.⁸ My examples or cases are not applications of theory, but ways of bringing new knowledge to the table and resisting a general theory of depression. They are dense or complex enough to speak back

to a medical theory of depression, to create problems for it, to transform it.

In particular, my examples are reparative ones, which tell us something not just about depression but about ways of living. They emanate from the insurgent and experimental genres of queer cultures—performance, activist documentary, crafting, and installation art—that attempt to make things, to be creative, to do something. They are the creative accompaniments to this essay's ambitions to provide a way of thinking that does not have to be scientific or to marshal evidence in the form of generalizable data to constitute knowledge. They taught me that depression is ordinary—as is its "cure," which resides not in medical treatment but in the art of daily living.

THE DEPRESSION ARCHIVE: KIKI AND HERB AND MATERNAL MELODRAMA

Do you wanna stay in bed all day?
Do you remember feeling any other way?

—Le Tigre, "Much Finer"

My depression archive includes these lines from Le Tigre, which provide a gratifyingly public statement of feelings of withdrawal that would seem to resist being shared.⁹ The riotgrrrl and zine culture of the 1990s out of which Le Tigre emerged sustained the feminist conviction that going public with your feelings can make a difference both to how you feel and to the state of the world. Le Tigre's expression of lethargy seems like the opposite of the emotional extravagance of Kiki and Herb, but their live performances also served as an important accompaniment and backbeat to my thinking while writing this book.¹⁰ Embodying the characters of Kiki, an aging alcoholic cabaret artist staging her comeback, and Herb, her longtime piano accompanist, Justin Bond and Kenny Mellman regaled East Village audiences with their ingenious medleys of popular songs and autobiographical monologues (followed by wider visibility in an off-Broadway theatrical run and Carnegie Hall show) before parting in 2008 (figure 3.2).¹¹ Although I could unapologetically claim that Kiki and Herb are in the depression archive simply because, like Le Tigre, they have made me feel better on so many occa-



3.2 Justin Bond and Kenny Mellman as Kiki and Herb, 2007. Photo courtesy of Liz Ligouri.

sions, their capacity to do so prompted my thinking about the relation between expressions of mute withdrawal like *Le Tigre's* and more melodramatic modes of articulating depression's ordinary feelings.

The art of the domestic looks different when it leaves the confines of the normative white middle-class home, the breeding ground for what gets classified as depression, even if it must ultimately be understood as an equal opportunity form of misery. Not only is the domestic transformed by feminists, especially queer ones, but it looks different again when taken up in *Kiki and Herb's* twisted cabaret show, in which maternal melodrama meets the cover song and child abuse is never far from the discussion. ("Ladies and gentlemen," Kiki declares, "if you were not abused as a child, you must have been a very ugly child.") Although I'm wary of how sincerity can fall out of the picture when gay male camp culture reframes and ironizes feminine genres such as the maternal melodrama and the women's film, I can't help loving *Kiki and Herb* for how they mine the maternal melodrama as an archive of de-

pression, giving voice to otherwise mute feelings, sometimes in high-concept stories that are heartbreakingly funny and sad, and sometimes just in a guttural shriek.

Although *Kiki's* over-the-top emotions can seem just the opposite of the mute darkness of the depressed, the multilayered life history that emerges in her sometimes extended between-song monologues hints that she has likely been laid low by depression on numerous occasions. Rather than dwelling there, she has found a way to go public with the pain, swigging another rye and ginger ale, telling another story about her lost or dead children, and exorcising her demons in songs that are loud, long, and full of anguish. *Kiki* revitalizes the tradition of maternal melodrama in the serial drama of her relations with Brad, her oldest child, a homosexual decorator who lives in San Francisco's Russian Hill; Coco, who was washed overboard while *Kiki* was on a Mediterranean cruise after a big comeback show in Monte Carlo; and Misty, her younger daughter, who was taken from her by child protective services and now lives in foster care, although *Kiki* occasionally visits her in Delaware and has vague dreams of reconciliation. Despite her dubious maternal skills, *Kiki* makes poignant her loss and her love, demonstrating the affects of motherhood to be far more complex than the sentimental representation of a natural and unsullied attachment. She offers a shrewd cultural analysis of bad mothering as a systemic rather than individual problem. In addition to regaling us with her own personal woes, an ongoing theme of her monologues (through references to Columbine and other current events) is public hypocrisy about children, who are sentimentalized on the one hand and abused on the other. The culture that would exorcise or scapegoat bad mothers like *Kiki* is only providing an alibi for its own violence, and one of the cathartic dimensions of a *Kiki and Herb* show is that, rather than wallowing alone in its blues or being encouraged to forget them, the audience makes contact with the harshness of the world at large in the intimate company of a cabaret setting.

This potent affective brew is achieved through a combination of music and story, when, as in the musical, *Kiki* turns to song to express the affective excess that can't be contained in her narrative. In addition to speaking bluntly about domestic life, she uses song to express the swirl of affects that are so feebly named by depression, and she demonstrates why melodrama has given voice to the silent and disenfranchised. The affective experience of the show is often wrenchingly

exhausting, as it oscillates between stories and carefully crafted medleys that move from one emotional register to the next at breakneck speed. Both the medley and the cover song are important ways of incorporating multiple affective registers—cover versions, especially of pop songs, can craft new and very personal meanings from even cliché expressions of emotion. Kiki and Herb are masters of the art of covers as they range from popular favorites, such as Britney Spears's “. . . Baby One More Time,” whose line “my loneliness is killing me” acquires new emotional profundity, to obscure tunes by bands such as the Geraldine Fibbers, to independent classics that are unlikely cover material for a lounge act, such as PJ Harvey's “Rid of Me” or Nirvana's “Smells Like Teen Spirit.”

Kiki's delivery (and Herb's arrangements) bring out the emotional content of the songs, twisting them to express feelings you might not have known were there. The medleys further enhance the cover songs' emotional dynamics as abrupt and sometimes surprising musical segues create unusual combinations and collisions of feeling. This is melodrama, but it is melodrama that has so many emotional registers that it begins to do justice to what it means to feel bad, including what it means to be depressed, rather than merely transforming it into overwrought or reductive sentimentality. Kiki provides sustenance for those in search of the soundtrack for political despair and, by performing femininity in all its queerness, reveals anew the art of women's genres. As a prelude to a discussion of how a Public Feelings approach to depression draws on the legacies of feminism, I invoke Kiki and Herb's performances as a model for how popular women's genres maintain their power to express the complexity of everyday emotional life.

PUBLIC FEELINGS AND LEGACIES OF FEMINISMS

Allyson Mitchell's *War on Worries* is an apt visual emblem for the Public Feelings project of tracking the intertwined histories of feminism and depression. The gendering of mental health is referenced in her placement of the toy soldiers inside the enclosure of the matchbox-size domestic interior and then again inside the frame of the shadow box. She reverses the usual relation between home front and battlefield—the soldiers are now in the home—and thus articulates the links between

female ailments ranging from hysteria to depression and a masculinized history of shell shock, combat fatigue, and PTSD. Mitchell provides a visual rendition of arguments like Jonathan Metzl's, for example, about the prominence of women in the successive marketing of drugs such as Miltown, Valium, and Prozac as pharmaceutical treatment for depression.¹² Although the ultimate goal of such critiques might be to consider the feelings of other demographic niches, the middle-class white woman has been central to medical histories of mental illness.

Critiques of the connections between women and madness have thus been foundational for feminism, which has promoted the idea that feelings of unhappiness that get classified by categories such as depression are better served by social revolution than by medication. In the early days of second-wave feminism, books like Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* cast feminism as a cure for a domesticity whose problems manifested as bad feelings—housewives needed to leave the repressive confines of the home that was making them crazy. In Friedan's account of “the problem that has no name,” feminism is the answer to the “strange feeling of desperation” that plagues so many middle-class women and gets falsely represented as a medical or social pathology; her analysis encouraged women to name “desperation” as a public feeling that could become the catalyst for a political movement.¹³ For the generation that followed, leaving the home for the workplace hasn't quite proven to be the solution that middle-class women sought; antidepressants seem to be most frequently prescribed not for mad housewives but for working people who need to be able to function amid the high levels of stress and ambition created by the simultaneous demands of career and family. But the everyday lives of middle-class women, now trying to juggle work-life balance, remain a point of departure for exploring social problems as problems of feeling, all the more urgent when the neoliberal gutting of social welfare that assigns affective labor to the family or privatized intimacies creates challenges even for alternative kinships.

In trying to use white middle-class women's distress as an entry point into systemic inequalities and violence, feminism has butted up against some intractable problems. It has been a challenge to hold on to the felt experience of depression, of an everyday life that produces sentiments such as “I don't care,” “I am worthless,” or “I don't know what to do,” without getting hamstrung by the incommensurability of small-scale

anxiety and global problems. In calling for a revolution in feeling or a “war on worries,” feminism has often critiqued affective solutions to affective problems as a substitute for more properly political solutions. The result is various forms of depressive impasse—the sense that our feelings, both good and bad, don’t matter and that any effort to transform the sense of feeling bad about oneself that is so endemic to capitalism is too insignificant to make a difference. The nagging buzz of critique is ready to question good feelings as a class privilege that ignores or exploits others or an inadequate form of politics that is merely cultural; efforts to make change are never enough, there is always more to be done.

Lauren Berlant (who along with Katie Stewart has been one of the most important Public Feelings fellow travelers for this project) offers one of the most sophisticated versions of a critique of women’s culture as a “sentimental bargain,” the marketing of strong feeling, including romance and melodramatic suffering, as a comfortable refuge not only from social transformation but from feeling the actual conditions of one’s life or the larger world. The term *juxtapolitical*, which Berlant coins to describe the way that cultures of feeling frequently opt out of conventional politics as an arena of social change, articulates the limits of many alternative public cultures, including those based around art and creativity.¹⁴ One of the strengths of her analysis lies in her persistent attention to “the unfinished business of sentimentality,” the places where “the sentimental bargain” to be found in the history of discourses of domesticity, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s politics of abolition and the melodrama of the women’s film, continues to thrive.¹⁵ In subsequent work that takes up the category of political depression that emerged from *Feel Tank* and *Public Feelings*, the “sentimental bargain” morphs into the more general category of “cruel optimism,” which describes the affective condition of an everyday life in which the ways people seek to flourish turn out to be bad for them.

The focus on intimacy drawn from women’s culture continues to play a role in Berlant’s analysis since one of the paradigmatic forms of “cruel optimism” is the turn to romance (and other forms of bad attachment) as a source of solace when it becomes impossible to imagine how the “better good life” might emerge from something other than an attachment to normative forms of kinship. Especially powerful, though, in Berlant’s vision of politics as embedded in the domestic, the intimate,

and the complexities of desire and attachment is her focus on the everyday act of eating. Honing in on scenes of ordinary domesticity, she frequently describes sentimental culture in terms of eating what is bad for you, a graphically material metaphor for the desire for immediate gratification: “As when a refrigerator is opened by a person hungry for something other than food, the turn to sentimental rhetoric at moments of social anxiety constitutes a generic wish for an unconflicted world, one wherein structural inequities, not emotions and intimacies, are epiphenomenal.”¹⁶ One of her paradigmatic cases of “cruel optimism” is the obesity epidemic, which she describes as a form of “slow death,” to describe how capitalism affects people at the level of daily somatic practice by offering them forms of immediate gratification and comfort that are ultimately killing them. (Antidepressants can also be understood as a prescription for “cruel optimism,” the pills that are handed out to be ingested internally as a substitute for transforming the world.) Berlant risks the charged race and class politics of stigmatizing the obese for their fatness in order to focus attention on the systemic prevalence of junk food and the impossibility of conceiving of somatic sovereignty as dependent on individual agency or choice. She is thus also skeptical about the forms of public culture, such as fat activism, that emerge from reclaiming the pathologization of overeating (like the reclamation of the stigma of trauma or queerness) by asserting agency.

Berlant can often seem like the exemplary case of Sara Ahmed’s “feminist killjoy” in her redescription of what seems like pleasure as in fact contaminated and in her insistence that “shifts in affective atmosphere are not equal to changing the world.”¹⁷ Yet while her attentiveness to the ways that social life is lived as a relation to body and eating seems harsh at some points, it also emerges from her relentless curiosity about how to describe intimacy and attachment without being reductive or dismissive. She slows down the analysis of ordinary life to challenge understandings of sovereignty that presume a rational subject in control of her desires and to surprise us with accounts of people moving laterally, spacing out, or just keeping up.

In the spirit of slowing down, I want to look at how people find ways to live better in bad times, including countering “slow death” with “slow living.” I turn to contemporary practices of crafting, which emerge from the ambivalent status of women’s culture as the site of both struggle and renewed opportunity for feminist politics (or of what

I have elsewhere called “mixed feelings”). Engaged in a deep dialogue with women’s culture through forms of practice that perform thinking by doing, crafting self-consciously questions what constitutes feminism and what constitutes the political; that engagement and its ambition to provide forms of therapy and self-help that address conditions such as depression provide a suggestive laboratory for the concerns of Public Feelings.

Crafting practices inhabit the epidemic of feeling bad that is one form of insidious slow death spawned by neoliberal capitalism, especially among the middle classes who, despite fewer material obstacles to thriving, are still bogged down by worry and—to invoke a concept that is both psychic and somatic—stress. Unlike forms of self-sovereignty that depend on a rational self, crafting is a form of body politics where agency takes a different form than application of the will. It fosters ways of being in the world in which the body moves the mind rather than the other way around, or in which, echoing neurobiological views in another register, body and mind are deeply enmeshed or holistically connected. It produces forms of felt sovereignty that consist not of exercising more control over the body and senses but instead of “recovering” them from the mind or integrating them with it. Crafting emerges from the domestic spaces that are at the heart of women’s culture to provide a model for ways of living that acknowledge forms of structural inequity while also practicing modes of bodily and sensory life that incorporate or weave them into the fabric of a daily life that literally includes texture, color, and sensory pleasure.

Crafting is about a way of being in the world that requires not just knowledge but practice, or the “pedagogy of recognition” that Eve Sedgwick, herself a crafter, describes in relation to Buddhism.¹⁸ The craft of slow living is not exclusively middle class, since it takes up the manual labor often associated with working-class and precapitalist ways of living and working. And lest crafting seem pervaded by nostalgia for the past, it is important to note that it belongs to new queer cultures and disability cultures that (along with animal studies) are inventing different ways of being more “in the body” and less in the head. As a practice, and not just an ephemeral feeling, crafting is not the homology or first step or raw material for some form of political change beyond it. It is already a form of self-transformation, although it can

also be a way to build the spiritual warrior self necessary for doing other kinds of work in the world, including organized political activism.

THE DEPRESSION ARCHIVE: CRAFTING

When you’re making crafts you’re spicing up the world
 Face it pretty girl, you’re . . . craftastic!
 You’re following no plans, you’re building it with hands
 Let’s do a dance because you’re . . . craftastic!
 Let’s get together and share supplies
 Your craftsmanship deserves top prize
 Glue it, cut it, stitch it, felt it,
 Paint it, bead it, dough it, dye it,
 Embroider it, solder it, hotter it.
 Let’s go walking (walk, walk)
 Let’s get talking (talk, talk)
 Let’s craft talk, craft talk
 You can build me whatever you want.
 —“Craft Talk,” Leslie Hall

A big woman who sports a gold lamé jumpsuit, larger-than-life hair and makeup, and 1970s-style oversize glasses, Leslie Hall, a performance artist and front woman for Leslie and the Lys, sings rap song anthems about gold pants and bedazzled sweaters.¹⁹ She collects gem sweaters from thrift stores and has accumulated a collection large enough to be housed in a mobile home she has turned into a museum. During her show, audience members wearing their own gem sweaters in homage to her passion are invited onstage to bow to her and have their sweaters christened with original names. With her queer femme drag and an astounding array of merchandise she makes herself, including rainbow shoelace headbands, spandex jumpsuits, and a stunning collection of self-designed T-shirts, Hall has crafted an exhilarating and poignant character and a world that surrounds her (figure 3.3).

Leslie Hall’s gem sweaters are only one of many signs of a recent resurgence of interest in crafting: neofeminist publications like *Bitch* and *Bust* provide a heady mix of consumerism and politics with stories



3.3 Leslie Hall, Stargazer. Photo by Rena Hall.

about artists and designers and activism, instructions for cool stuff you can make yourself, and ads for things to buy from independent artisans taking advantage of web-based sales. Annual gatherings such as the Renegade Craft Fair that bring craft makers together to promote their wares and connect with one another have become regular ongoing events. When I visited Stitch in Austin, for example, the large convention hall was filled with booths displaying T-shirts with hand-drawn designs; handbags quilted, patched, and sewn from colorful fabrics; and clever renditions of household items, such as potholders and dish-towels.²⁰ The programming also included a DJ, a fashion show, and an area where you could make your own crafts, thus promoting crafting

as a full-fledged cultural scene, not just an individual taste or hobby or a marketing trend. The documentary *Handmade Nation* (2009) and an accompanying book show how crafting has emerged as a locus for alternative ways of living and political projects.²¹ The craft movement has also established an online community through sites such as Etsy, where crafters can sell their work and also create social networks over much longer distances. And crafting has even made its way into Public Feelings programming; for an event in Austin to discuss the war in Iraq, we created a crafting table where participants could make political stickers, drawings, and other objects while they talked.

The tensions between two different versions of feminism (often cast as a generational difference), one that repudiates the home and one that returns to it, can be seen in contemporary practices of crafting, which have become the public articulation of new forms of feminist sensibility and collectivity. Born from the DIY aesthetics of punk sub-cultures, especially their feminist incarnations ranging from riotgrrrl to Ladyfest, crafting provides opportunities to make art that is usable (although often by lending a decorative finesse to mundane objects and activities), accessible to all, reproducible (albeit manually rather than mechanically), and marketable. It presents itself less as an alternative to market culture and more as an alternative market culture. The knitting store has now joined the feminist bookstore of the 1970s and the sex toy store of the 1990s as a public space for feminist thinking and activity. Such stores blur the boundaries between producers and consumers, since what is often being bought are materials for DIY projects, and people are sharing work and using commercial space as public space for organizing, learning, and community building.

Crafting forges a complex set of relations to the historical past, situating itself in dialogue with both second-wave feminisms of the 1970s and post-Second World War domestic cultures, as well as with longer histories of women's culture and industrial culture extending back to the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Although with its emphasis on artisanal rather than mass production it is tempting to see crafting as the expression of the desire to return to a period before commodification, it is more accurate to think of it as a return to a different form of commodification or to different periods of commodification, exemplified by the taste for retro styles from a prefeminist era, including knitted scarves, quilted tote bags, and kitchen gear, such as potholders,

aprons, and dish towels. The spirit of William Morris, himself on the hinge between art and design (and distinctions between high and low culture) and between industrial and handmade production, is present but it's filtered through the post-Second World War culture of Betty Crocker cookbooks, *Ladies' Home Journal* and other women's magazines, and McCall's and Simplicity home sewing patterns, as well as the discarded styles of more recent decades. That longer history of efforts to forge forms of industrial production hospitable to the aesthetics of craft and to embrace previous historical styles (such as the medieval) rather than making a modernist break with the past offers a valuable context for contemporary crafting.²² It is a reminder that this movement should be seen not as outside of consumerism or previous generations of feminism but rather as another moment in a long-standing set of constitutive tensions about the relation between the premodern and the modern, women's culture and feminism, and handmade and industrial modes of production.

Crafting thus stages a dialogue with both feminism and its putatively prefeminist past, acknowledging the way that women's culture persists across both moments, and doing so in ways that are charged with intense feelings about this history. A feminist camp humor often accompanies the rehabilitation of domestic hobbies such as needlepoint, rug hooking, and paint by numbers, which combined art and mass production in order to encourage women in particular to express their creativity by following detailed instructions and reproducing images designed by someone else through the painstaking labor of repetitive motion. Thrift store finds provide inspiration for a vast repertoire of images—floral arrangements, landscapes, animals, especially cute ones, and sad-eyed girls, with an emphasis on bright, even garish color—which crafters are now recirculating in ways that bridge the past and the present and are saturated with affect. The scarves and sweaters that have been rendered obsolete by microfibers and other new fleecy materials can now be recreated in high-quality cotton and pure wool yarns that are significantly different from the acrylics and synthetics increasingly marketed in the postwar period. The domestic textile arts that once gave women many forms of creative outlet but gradually became defunct (at least for middle-class housewives) because women were too busy going to work and buying for convenience have now been reclaimed as a way of indicating that one has leisure time for hobbies and for creativity. In many

cases, the items being made, such as purses and kitchen accessories, are associated with forms of femininity that have often been repudiated by second-wave feminism, and they can signal a disidentification with critiques of the domestic, the feminine, and the cute. They are often, if not luxury items, accessory or decorative items that aren't strictly functional, as evident by their frequent status as collectibles. Because craft produces objects that are both useful and exceed the necessary, it is readily available to commodified proliferation, but it is also about art in everyday life.

Crafting's heterogeneity makes it rich terrain for cultural politics, and one of the most important dreams attached to the current crafting scene is that it gives rise to new forms of collectivity and politics. Knitting circles and other groups in which people share information and make their labor more social easily lend themselves to other forms of collectivity, including activism or what, in a redescription of the political, some are calling "craftivism." The Revolutionary Knitting Circle, a Canadian group that has knitted large banners for its appearances in demonstrations and marches for progressive causes, has a mission statement that includes "speeding forward the revolution through knitting," a nonviolent and "constructive revolution" dedicated to "creating community and local independence which, in this corporate society, is a truly revolutionary act." In 2004, the Cast Off group in London staged an event at the Victoria and Albert Museum in which over four thou-



3.4 Lisa Anne Auerbach,
Body Count Mittens, 2005.

sand knitters took over the space (thus bringing grassroots crafting to the preeminent design museum, whose history includes contributions by William Morris).

Using the web as a point of distribution, political knitters such as Lisa Anne Auerbach provide patterns for projects such as the Body Count Mittens, in which the knitter documents the dead in Iraq by knitting the body count at the start of the project on one hand and the number dead when the project is finished on the other. The time-based practice of knitting gets connected to the time of mortality, and the sustained process of knitting the number becomes an act of mourning that gives the knitter a chance to contemplate the dead (figure 3.4). Auerbach also adapts knitting's domestic use for clothing and fashion to make public installations of sweaters and skirts that bear political messages subtly embedded in the beautiful colors and patterns. For an installation at the Nottingham Contemporary that engaged with the history of Lud-

3.5 Lisa Anne Auerbach, *Take This Knitting Machine and Shove It*, installation at Nottingham Contemporary Museum, 2009.

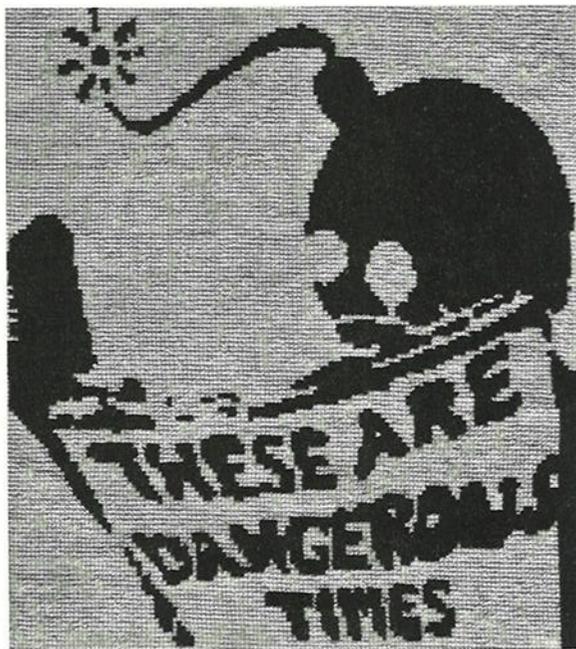


dite rebellion in the clothing industry, one dress bore a slogan borrowed from Diderot's revolutionary writings, "Strangle the last king with the entrails of the last priest," and another announced "We are all heroes" on the front and "We are all terrorists" on the back as a way of reappropriating political discourse and T-shirt identifications (figure 3.5). Practices such as knitbombing take knitting into public spaces often with the aim of transforming the industrial into the "cozy" by covering objects with knitting. In Austin, Magda Sayeg of Knitita Please covered the trees outside the Blanton Art Museum on the University of Texas campus (with the state capitol in sight; figure 3.6), the reflector signs of an underpass in a major traffic thoroughway, and lampposts outside an alternative bookstore, as well as the corporate offices of Etsy in Brooklyn and a statue near the Eiffel Tower in Paris. These are only a few examples of knitting-based activism, which continues to proliferate in public spaces and to inspire new collective formations:

3.6 Magda Sayeg and Knitita Please, *Knitted Wonderland*, installation at Blanton Museum, Austin, Texas, 2011. Photo by Shawn P. Thomas.



Although these new forms of crafting ostensibly take knitting out of isolation and into collectivity by taking it out of the home and into the street, crafting has long been a mode of socializing. As with other forms of manual labor, it's possible to talk or listen while the hands do the work. Thus while a more self-conscious sense of the relation between crafting and politics has created new formations, crafting's basis in collectivity and its connections to working-class culture have long been part of its social power. Although craftivists often worry about what circumstances make knitting and other crafts count as politics, they are also reinventing what we might mean by the term.²³ Betsy Greer articulates a craftivist mission: "Because we create to connect beyond ourselves. Whether it's next door or across the globe. Craft and activism both take and inspire passion. When used as a joint force, they can quite possibly begin to slowly challenge and change things. Atrocities are happening in our front yards and on our televisions and we need to find ways to react against what is happening without either giving up or exploding. This is less about mass action or more about realizing what you can do to make things around you better. . . . In promoting the idea that people can use their own creativity to improve the world, craftiv-



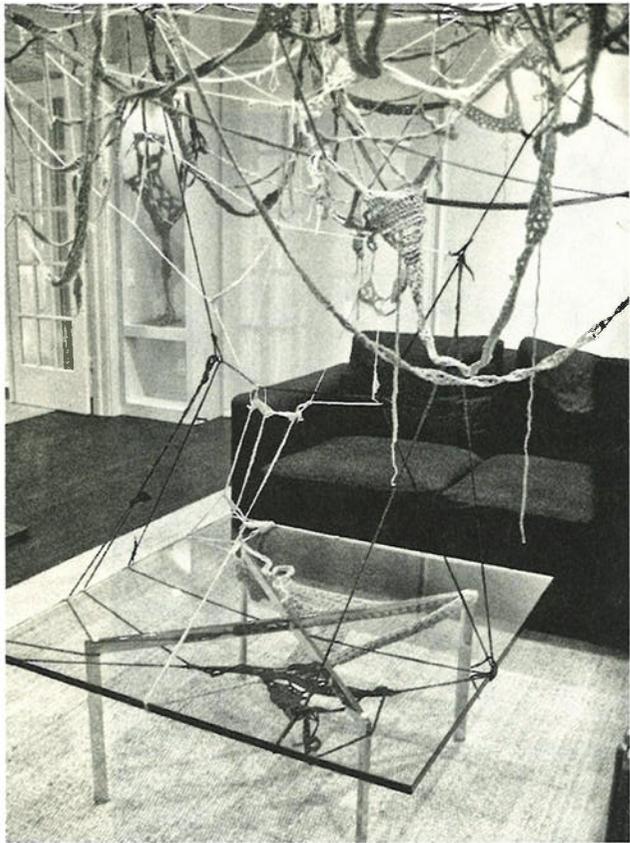
3.7 Betsy Greer,
*These Are
Dangerous Times*,
2004.

ism allows those who wish to voice their opinions and support their causes the chance to do just that . . . but without chanting or banner waving and at their own pace."²⁴ Greer's vision for changing the world through crafting integrates the personal and the political; the creativity fostered by crafting is itself meaningful because the political is constituted by the small local gestures embodied in knitting projects or her own cross-stitching works (figure 3.7).

Sheila Pepe's Common Sense

Craft culture is a sprawling version of what Katie Stewart would call a "little world," and although craftivism might seem like the most obvious place to look for crafting's political potential, crafting's interventions in the art world are central to the reclamation of feminist cultural politics, as well as to crafting's redefinition of what counts as politics to include sensory interactions with highly tactile spaces and with other people—or, in other words, feelings.²⁵ My archive of depression includes the work of two lesbian artists, Sheila Pepe and Allyson Mitchell, whose ability to render in visual and material form the relation between craft and public feelings has enabled my thinking. While Pepe's work is seemingly more abstract and conceptual and immersed in a fine art tradition, and Mitchell's emerges from DIY and activist cultures that have intruded upon gallery spaces, one of their points of convergence is that they both claim a connection to Judy Chicago, who has often been the stigmatized and sensational touchstone for critiques (including those by other feminists) of feminist celebrations of craft.²⁶ Not only does their work embody a reparative response to conflicts within feminism and between art and craft, but the utopian spaces of their large-scale installations produce a reparative experience of depression by literally engaging the senses in a way that makes things feel different.²⁷

Since 2000, the New York-based artist Sheila Pepe has been suspending huge crochet pieces from gallery walls and ceilings to make her site-specific installations. She has sometimes combined these delicate and unpredictable cobwebs with pencil drawings, which she calls *doppelgängers*, that respond to the shadows that the hangings cast on the walls. The results are both sensual and abstract, material and conceptual, referencing feminist textile arts of the 1970s and also making popular crochet the stuff of art world sculpture and installation. Some



3.9a and 3.9b

Sheila Pepe, *Common Sense*,
a collaboration with curator
Elizabeth Dunbar, testsite/
Fluent-Collaborative, Austin,
2009. Photos by Kate Watson.



Plate 1. Sheila Pepe. Detail from *Gowanus*.

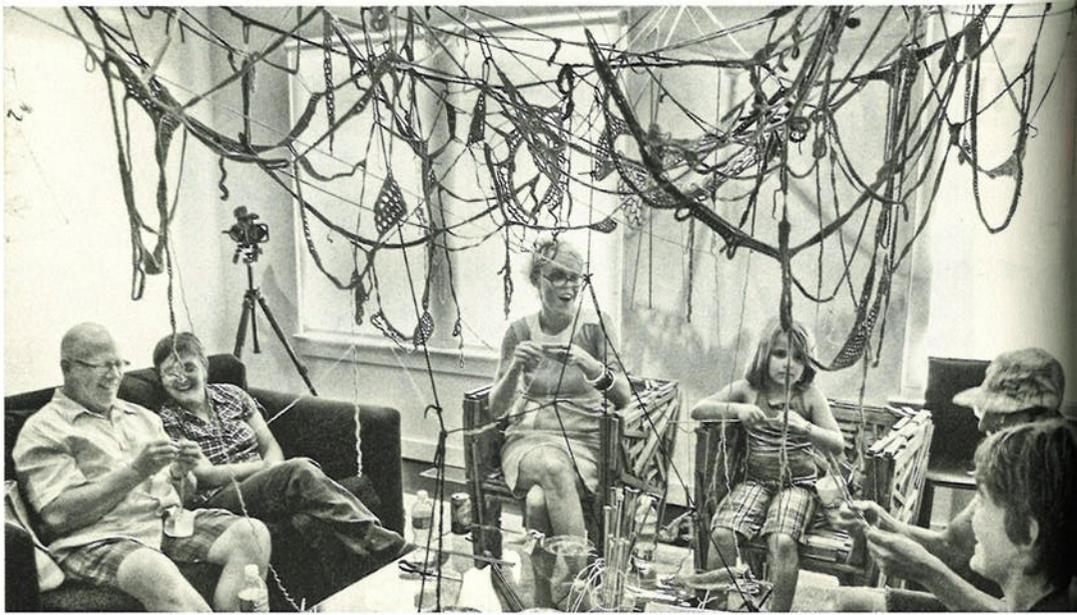


Plate 2. Sheila Pepe. Detail from *Greybeard*.



Plate 3. Sheila Pepe. *Mind the Gap*.

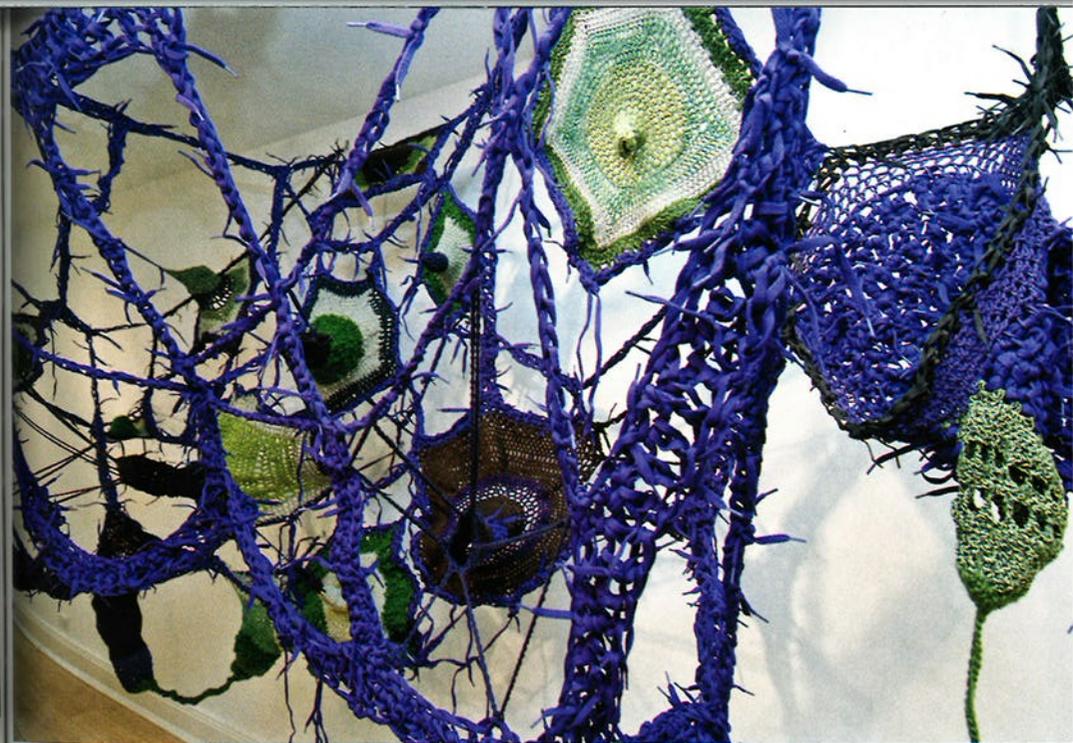


Plate 5. Sheila Pepe. Detail from *Your Granny's Not Square*.

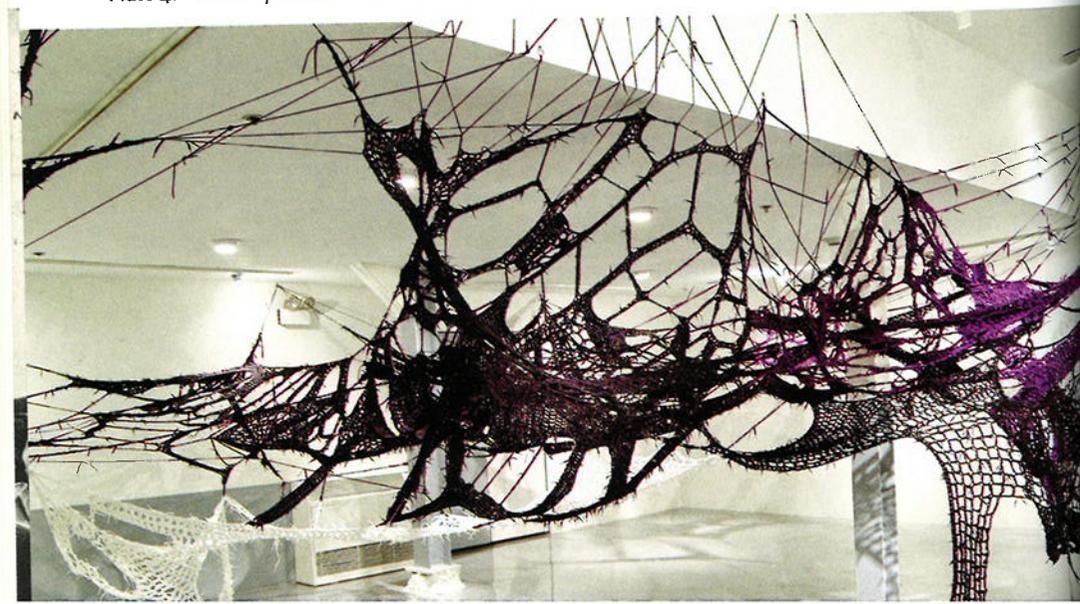


Plate 4. Sheila Pepe. *Under the F&G*.

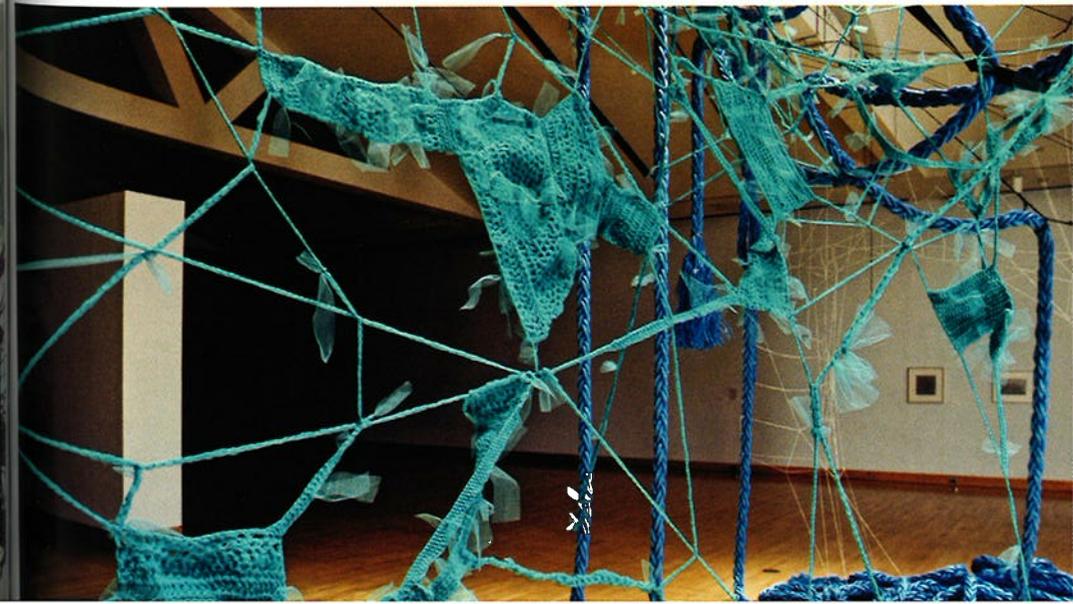


Plate 6. Sheila Pepe. Detail from *Terminal*.





Plates 9, 10, and 11. Allyson Mitchell. *Hungry Purse*.



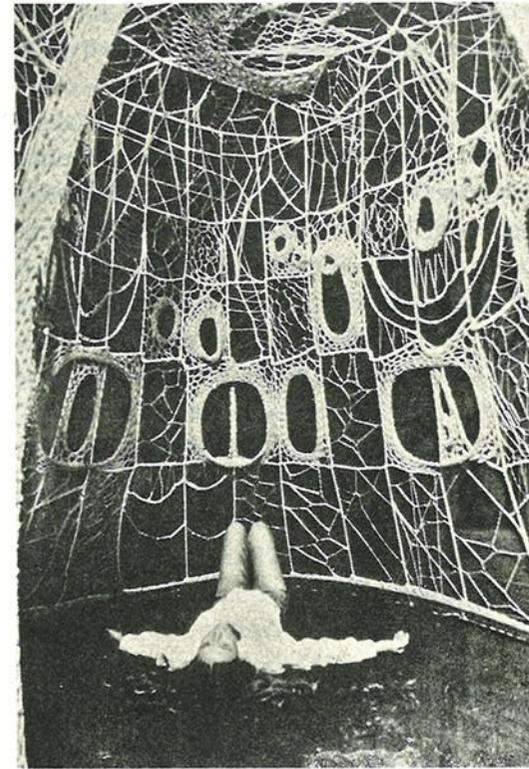


3.9c and 3.9d
Sheila Pepe, *Common Sense II*,
Contemporary Arts Museum,
Houston, 2010. Photos by the
author.



lery space for experimental projects (figures 3.9a and 3.9b).²⁸ Pepe uses regular yarn this time around, unlike in some of her earlier pieces, but the clusters of colored yarn explode the neat geometry of crocheted squares typical of such materials. As with the larger installations, there's something magical about their appearance in the midst of the living-room furniture and across the dining-room table, carefully tailored to the space so that visitors can still sit or move around. In a collaborative and performative process of making and unmaking, viewers were invited to become crafters and use the yarn to knit and crochet their own projects, thus dismantling the piece over the course of the exhibition. In a second version of *Common Sense*, at Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum in 2010, crafting transformed the more conventional gallery space as viewers sat on stools within and under the installation in order to make their own pieces, enfolded into the piece through direct interaction rather than standing outside of it (figures 3.9c and 3.9d).²⁹ As the work literally unraveled over time, with strands of red and gray hanging down, its somewhat bedraggled appearance became an invitation to participate. Enacting what she calls "preparation for the end of ephemera," Pepe traces her interest in ephemerality not only to high art traditions of conceptual and performance art but also to her experience growing up working in a deli where lavishly prepared food disappears when eaten.³⁰ In *Common Sense*, she produces a reparative solution to the problem of ephemerality because disappearance, or unraveling or becoming undone, is an occasion for making something new. As with the monk collecting and then burning his palm leaves, the process and rhythm of the work is what matters, and the activity of the people who are simultaneously unmaking and making creates the magic of the commons.

Refusing to choose between the domestic and the public, the intimate and the monumental, craft and fine art, Pepe provocatively names as her influences both Judy Chicago and Eva Hesse, slyly referring to them as the parents who didn't speak to one another and expressing a conviction that work that can be simultaneously sexy and abstract.³¹ (One of her exhibitions was titled "Hot Lesbian Formalism!") Pepe embraces Chicago and lesbian feminism, but she also affiliates herself with the minimalist art practice of Hesse, whose relation to the history of feminism has been revisited in recent retrospectives.³² For example, in a piece titled *Mr. Slit*, a black crochet hanging with a red-rimmed labial opening, Pepe invokes both vaginal art and the more amorphous sen-



3.10 Faith Wilding, *Crocheted Environment (Womb Room)*, 1972. Rope and yarn, 9' x 9' x 9', Womanhouse, Los Angeles.

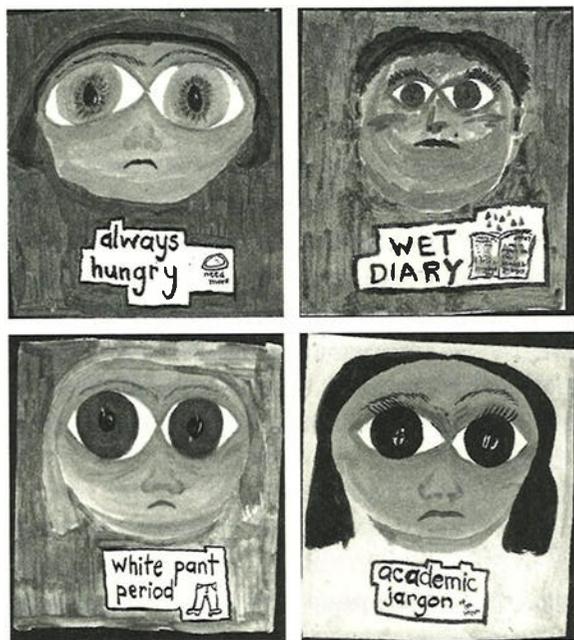
sual shapes of Hesse's latex sculptures (plate 7). Pepe's work also recalls that of Faith Wilding, whose *Crocheted Environment (Womb Room)*, which was part of the Woman House project in Los Angeles in 1972, epitomizes the forms of feminist textile installation that have been critiqued as essentialist but are now acquiring renewed visibility (figure 3.10). Pepe refuses divisions within feminism and the art world, and she is also unapologetic about claiming an identity as an artist without feeling obliged to be an activist or critical of the gallery system to count as politically engaged.

In the Hungry Purse with Allyson Mitchell

Somewhere between Sheila Pepe's art world practice and Leslie Hall's pop culture performance lies the capacious and eclectic oeuvre of Allyson Mitchell, whose *War on Worries* is just one of her many projects

that draw inspiration from crafting. Although her work is now being exhibited in galleries and museums, she comes out of feminist and queer DIY subcultures rather than formal art training, and her background includes collaborative filmmaking (including lots of animation), fat activist performance with *Pretty Porky* and *Pissed Off*, music and recording as *Freeshow Seymour*, and a Ph.D. in women's studies. She has often expressed the sensibility of *Public Feelings*, in series such as *55 Things That Tried to Kill Me*, for example, where portraits of sad-eyed girls are labeled with problems ranging from “academic jargon” and “grant applications” to “cellulite,” “always hungry,” “wet diary,” and “white pant period.” The serial practice that is often characteristic of crafting leads to multiple images that give each indignity, no matter how small, its own moment of publicity. Ordinary feelings acquire melodramatic status through the big eyes and bold colors that use the aesthetics of girly cuteness as a form of diva expression (figure 3.11).

A self-described “maximalist,” Mitchell often finds the materials for her art in thrift stores, where she has collected shag rugs, crocheted



3.11 Allyson Mitchell, *55 Things That Tried to Kill Me*, 2000.

afghans, ceramic figurines, fake fur, and macramé plant holders. While some versions of crafting reject mass production in favor of handmade or artisanal production, Mitchell's work engages with the marketplace of commodities, but often in its more abject forms. Recycling objects and styles associated with previous generations, Mitchell is drawn to that which has been rejected as outmoded or *déclassé* (and hence a trigger for deep feelings). For her, the strong and frequently negative feelings attached to objects that are sentimental, cute, garish, cheap, or excessive resemble the feelings associated with both fat girls and feminisms, and this reservoir of shame, abjection, and mixed feelings is a resource for queer reparative strategies. Collecting the lost objects that others left behind to be thrown away or sold for cheap, and collecting in massive quantities that reveal consumption's popular trends, she creates new worlds out of discarded ones.

Like Pepe, Mitchell makes large-scale installations, including a series featuring the *Ladies Sasquatch*, a band of giant lesbian monsters whose overblown size is inspired by Mitchell's fat activism (plates 12–14). They are made of fun fur, the material of stuffed animals and kitschy costumes, whose garish colors and lavish textures Mitchell embraces. (She also used fun fur for a series of wall hangings inspired by paint by numbers and soft porn that turned large-bodied women into fat feminist sex symbols.) The *Ladies Sasquatch* are joined by the *Sasquatch familiars*, a tribe of protective totem animals with pink fur and garishly exposed nipples, teeth, and claws who are both cute and slightly grotesque. Simultaneously frightening and seductive, the *Sasquatches* offer a queer twist on gothic monstrosity and fairy tales, indigenous culture and colonialist myth, and lesbian feminist traditions of goddess worship.³³ The lady monsters hover between being overwhelming and being approachable—if they are scary, it's in the way that big female flesh has been scary, and Mitchell transforms that version of monstrosity into an erotics of the monster. Their luscious asses are unapologetically big and ask to be touched, but although fun fur maintains the tactility of many of the materials used in crafting and textile arts, the “artificial” more than the “natural” is being fetishized. If the monster is made sexy and attractive, it is not, however, domesticated, at least not in the sense of being defanged or tamed; the *Ladies Sasquatch* retain the power of their size and voluptuous proportions to become lesbian feminist icons.

For *Hungry Purse: The Vagina Dentata in Late Capitalism* (2006, 2008,

2010), Mitchell created a room-size female womb whose over-the-top abundance of textiles and colors is (quite literally) hysterical and touching.³⁴ Actively embracing what might seem like clichés about feminist art's focus on wombs, cunts, and the female reproductive body, Mitchell's sex-friendly dyke attitude transforms those traditions to make them less solemn. The doorway to the space is lined with crocheted afghans in multiple shades of pink and brown, which are draped in the shape of labial folds; to enter it one has to push past a hanging macramé sculpture that resembles a clitoris (plate 8). Inside the room is a riot of colors with shag rugs upholstering the floor and walls, blankets covering the ceiling, and throw pillows scattered about (plates 9 and 10). At one end stands a throne covered in shag-rug owls and framed by stuffed animal heads in pink fun fur (plate 11). Whether one sits in the chair, curls up in a corner to survey the room, or wanders around touching the space, the sensurround experience fosters a variety of feelings. With her maximalist sensibility, Mitchell does not try to fend off the obsessive-compulsiveness of overconsumption and she embraces the full range of joy and sadness, comfort and pain familiar from the melodrama and sentimentality of domestic genres. In its tactility, *Hungry Purse* is loaded with history, including history as the dust and dirt of the items that come from other people's pasts.

Mitchell's art practice finds its theoretical expression in her "Deep Lez I Statement," a manifesto in which she acknowledges critiques of lesbian feminism but refuses to repudiate it. Instead she sees it as part of a utopian vision for contemporary queer culture whose "both/and" sensibility embraces multiple histories and perspectives. "Deep Lez" thinking aims to acknowledge and address histories of conflict; one catalyst for the statement, for example, are the tensions between lesbian and trans identities and communities:

Deep Lez was coined to acknowledge the urgent need to develop inclusive liberatory feminisms while examining the strategic benefits of maintaining some components of a radical lesbian theory and practice. This project is carefully situated not to simply hold on to history, but rather to examine how we might cull what is useful from lesbian herstories to redefine contemporary urban lesbian (and queer) existence. In so doing, "lesbian" is resurrected as a potential site of radical identification, rather than one of de-politicized apathy (or worse, shame).³⁵

Just as the thrift store provides material for recycling rather than being a refuse pile, so too does Mitchell find a world of possibility in earlier generations of lesbian feminism, which can be used flexibly and creatively.

A striking example of this rehistoricization is Mitchell's recent collaboration with Judy Chicago as the curator of a retrospective of her textile art, which was accompanied by an exhibition of work by younger artists who use craft, such as Cat Mazza and Ginger Brooks Takahashi.³⁶ Naming as political feelings the "apathy" and "shame" that the failures and conflicts of feminism can produce, Mitchell seeks to avoid political depression by seeing the past as a potential ally and resource. Using crafting as a metaphor for her mix of theory and practice, Mitchell describes the Deep Lez sensibility as a "macraméd conceptual tangle for people to work through how they integrate art into their politics and how they live their lives and continue to get fired up about ideas. Deep Lez can offer alternative ways of imagining the world and who we are." In this unabashedly utopian vision, "macramé" de-

3.12 Allyson Mitchell, *Menstrual Hut Sweet Menstrual Hut*, 2010.



scribes the process of bringing together potentially disparate materials in unpredictable combinations and the refusal to separate art and politics or feminist generations.³⁷ Especially important is the Deep Lez version of the “art of daily living,” where a craftivist focus on practice means that politics is integrated into how people live their lives. *War on Worries* is one of my favorite manifestations of this sensibility because it doesn’t try to transcend the mundane but instead works with it. In *Menstrual Hut Sweet Menstrual Hut*, another space upholstered in shag rugs where visitors can watch Mitchell’s video animations, the soft textiles forms of craft and the virtual forms of mass media are combined, and media consumption becomes a collective and material experience (figure 3.12).³⁸ In installation works such as *Menstrual Hut Sweet Menstrual Hut*, and *Hungry Purse*, Mitchell seeks to create alternative spaces and built environments in which daily life can be literally felt and sensed differently.

Both Pepe and Mitchell thus offer a newly invigorated picture of the use of craft and the domestic in feminist art of the 1970s, ambivalence about which stigmatized figures such as Judy Chicago, and the generational narrative emerging from their work does not celebrate the “third wave” at the expense of the “second wave.” Their reparative and big-hearted relation to 1970s feminisms also characterizes their relation to the art world, which is seen as a home for craft rather than an institution to be rejected or deconstructed in favor of some putatively more radical or activist practice. Rather than approach the politics of crafting with the paranoid skepticism of the cultural critic through some calculus whose results we already know—in the words of Eve Sedgwick (again, herself an avid crafter and textile artist), “kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic”³⁹—they encourage us to get inside the “little world” that they create, a world of textures and colors that are handmade with love and attention.

Indeed, at a Public Feelings event in Toronto, we did so very literally, gathering in *Hungry Purse* for a discussion of art and utopia that included a group sing-along of cover songs ranging from Britney Spears’s “. . . Baby One More Time” (in homage to the version sung by Kiki and Herb as much as to Britney herself) to Joni Mitchell’s “The Circle Game” (for Canadian content). As we huddled together in the slightly too close embrace of shag rugs and crocheted afghans, it felt like there was room both to express loneliness and to feel a little less lonely. Al-

though we might have been using the currency of Berlant’s “sentimental bargain,” through the afghans that blanket distress with warm fuzzy feelings and bright cheery colors and the pop songs that express both inchoate and intense feelings, we were also creating a poignant sense of collectivity in a version of what Jill Dolan calls the “utopian performative.”⁴⁰

THE UTOPIA OF ORDINARY HABIT

In addition to its productive use in both activism and art, what particularly interests me about crafting is the process itself, especially the forms of repetition that it requires—how knit, purl, knit, purl, over and over again, becomes a creative act. In this respect, crafting is connected not only to creativity, art, and politics but to spirituality and sacred ritual. It requires modes of attention that resemble those of meditation: having something to do with your hands keeps the attention both focused and free, and you can remain on task in the midst of other distractions.⁴¹ Knitting and meditation share a rootedness in ordinary and daily life; the extension of “spiritual practice” to encompass knitting or other textile-based crafts is possible because both can involve the repetitive and regular motion of the body and its use for activities that can also be time-consuming and boring. Crafting is a way of making something creative out of the habitual nature of domestic life, a knowledge long embodied in its more traditional forms and now reclaimed to fit the changing context of everyday life.

I write about crafting in the context of depression because, as a form of daily activity (whether individual or collective) that can soothe the mind and even raise the spirit, it presents an alternative to treating depression with drugs. It also reframes what we mean by treatment since crafting and other activities like it may not be cures or antidotes but ways in which depression and related affects are lived with rather than banished. It reflects the sensibility of my depression memoir, which explores how politics are lived at home and in the body by chronicling activities such as preparing food, creating a built environment, and moving through space. And it participates in both these ordinary forms of creativity and the more specialized forms demanded by writing and other modes of intellectual and artistic production. No doubt one of

crafting's appeals for those who do primarily mental labor is the return to more concrete forms of manual activity. Moreover, it also conveys a DIY conviction that creativity, and even art, is available for everyone and that the results need not be special to be meaningful, and hence it challenges the perfectionism and hierarchies demanded and fostered by academic work.

Thus my investigation of depression is also an exploration of pleasure, joy, and vitality. The links between the ordinary habit of knitting and spiritual practice, and between crafting (as well as creativity more generally) and depression, lead to a cluster of keywords such as *hope*, *happiness*, *optimism*, and especially *utopia* that have been revived by the Public Feelings project and its various fellow travelers such as José Muñoz, Avery Gordon, Jill Dolan, Michael Snediker, and Sara Ahmed.⁴² Deeply skeptical about conventional forms of happiness, such as the heteronormative family, or fantasy forms of utopia such as colonial paradise, these critics nonetheless formulate an educated hope that fully recognizes the sorry state of the world and maintains plenty of room for unhappiness, melancholy, depression, and other bad feelings. There are definitely differences among them, which itself suggests that utopian sensibilities are a complex brew of "mixed feelings": Dolan is probably the most optimistic about the experience of hope and of "how utopia feels" that she finds at the theater (in contrast to Berlant's claim that "changes in affect can't change the world"); Gordon's utopia of African American survival strategies is decidedly unsentimental, while Snediker finds affirmation in the virtuosity of queer lyric poetry; Muñoz and Ahmed claim the bitchy queen and the feminist killjoy as modes of critical pleasure when critiquing conventional understandings of hope and happiness, but, like Dolan, Muñoz is drawn to queer performance worlds as a touchstone for "concrete utopia." Discussions of utopia and other related concepts have been part of queer theory debates about the "antisocial," which have circulated most prominently in connection with Lee Edelman's rejection of futurity as reproductive heteronormativity.⁴³ Central to this discussion has been the question of whether it is possible to sustain a commitment to the utopian without falling into the pastoralizing or romanticizing tendencies that Edelman (echoing Leo Bersani) critiques. It should be noted, though, that queer work on the utopian generally embraces negativity, finding the utopian in per-

version, abjection, failure, depression, and struggle, and hence refusing easy or binary distinctions between positive and negative affects.⁴⁴

My contribution to this discussion is to insist that daily life in all its ordinariness can be a basis for the utopian project of building new worlds in response to both spiritual despair and political depression. As forms of practice, rituals such as crafting, knitting, and other hobbies, as well as yoga, running, and other forms of exercise, belong to what I want to call a *utopia of ordinary habit*. Although the term *practice*, a repeated action whose meaning lies in the process of performing it, might seem more appropriate here, especially because of the connections between daily practice and spiritual practice, the positive and negative connotations of the term *habit* are also relevant. Habit encompasses both the desirable and healthy regularity of practice and the putatively unhealthy compulsions and obsessions of addiction. We try to break bad habits and give up addictions, and we can feel dulled by the routine of habit; moreover, building good habits can seem like the internalization of regimes of discipline and self-formation that make us good or docile subjects. Using the term *habit* in connection with utopia, however, suggests that habit can be a mechanism for building new ways of being in the world because it belongs to the domain of the ordinary, to activities that are not spectacular or unusual but instead arise from everyday life.⁴⁵ When a habit becomes a practice, a repeated action that is actively and consciously pursued, it has not left its everyday status behind. Ordinary activities or habits can be the ground for a practice, not just the specialized activities, such as reciting mantras or sitting still, that constitute spiritual practice or the carefully refined movements and skills that form the basis for artistic, athletic, or creative practice. The *utopia of ordinary habit* would be a version of Avery Gordon's "usable utopia," a utopia of the "here and now" that is "oriented toward the future" but "doesn't treat the future as either an off-world escape or a displacing fetish," as do the forms of utopia often found in the otherworldly exoticisms of science fiction and colonialist dreams.⁴⁶ It is also reminiscent of Foucault's interest in traditions of asceticism and "practices of the self" that provide a model for new ways of inhabiting the disciplinary regimes that constitute the modern self. It reconceives the rational sovereign subject as a sensory being who crafts a self through process and through porous boundaries between self and

other, and between the human and the nonhuman (including animals and things).⁴⁷

In addition to knitting and crafting, the *utopia of ordinary habit* can include the practice of writing that forms the basis for my depression memoir. Writing is presented, for example, as a form of spiritual practice in popular books such as Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*, which recommends daily "morning pages" as the foundation for creativity; Nathalie Goldberg's Buddhist *Writing Down the Bones*, which suggests the practice of regular writing as a way of staying focused on the present; and Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*, which encourages a writing process in which the act of writing is more important than the product and "shitty first drafts" are welcome. The habit of writing also belongs to ordinary practices such as keeping a diary, the everyday or popular genre that has been a mainstay of girls' culture, or maintaining a blog, the capacious new genre that is so well-suited to documenting the everyday and the present in painstaking detail. Across these various forms of writing practice, the emphasis is on writing as something that is ordinary because anyone can do it and because, as a regular habit, it makes creativity a part of everyday life. In the process of demystifying writing to construct it as an ordinary activity, writers such as Cameron, Goldberg, and Lamott implicitly suggest that spiritual practice take the humble form of ordinary habit. Even if this form of spiritual experience also partakes of the transcendent and extraordinary, it is rooted in the ordinary. It is about paying attention to what is immediately present and hence about valuing the ordinary and the detail. If the spiritual is about a connection with something beyond or outside the self, the route to that form of utopian feeling is the simple act of observing or noticing what lies in one's immediate vicinity (an act for which writing serves as a tool). And if it is about creating the sense of self-worth that comes from acknowledging the divine within, free writing facilitates the valuing of all thoughts and feelings without judgment that is also a form of ordinary habit. In these theories of writing, then, spiritual practice is a variant of ordinary habit (and vice versa), in part because they understand spirituality (like the concept of utopia) as something that is not transcendent or beyond but rooted in the here and now.

The *utopia of ordinary habit* is forged out of the loss of connection—to the body, to a meaningful sense of work, to relations with others—

that characterizes depression. It suggests that within current forms of domestic life are the simultaneously utopian and ordinary desires and activities that can remake the affective cultures of nuclear family life, consumerism, mass media, and neoliberal culture. But it does not seek to gloss over the dire state of contemporary politics, nor to deny the feelings of sadness, apathy, isolation, or anger that are often manifest in the practice of small daily gestures. As an example of this idea, I turn to Gregg Bordowitz's video *Habit*.

THE DEPRESSION ARCHIVE: HABIT

I think at the end of the day I make work so I can understand my own historical present. To me that's a very important thing—to be able to understand my own moment . . . for me, not in any kind of global sense, not for you, not for anyone else. I feel disturbed when for long periods of time I don't make the effort to somehow produce a cosmology for my self. —Gregg Bordowitz, *Habit*

Gregg Bordowitz's autodocumentary video *Habit* (2001), a follow-up to *Fast Trip, Long Drop* (1993), reflects on his daily life as a long-time HIV survivor in an era of globalized AIDS pandemic.⁴⁸ It explores the contradictions between habits that deaden, such as answering email and being inured to the stories of AIDS as global crisis, and habits that create awareness or facilitate life, such as meditating daily or taking pills for survival. Bordowitz is interested in questions of will and agency, of what makes it possible to do anything when the specter of death looms large and makes depression a seemingly inevitable condition of daily life.⁴⁹ *Habit* risks being boring in its depiction of ordinary routines of daily life; the video opens and closes with scenes of Bordowitz getting up in the morning and taking his pills, while also making coffee and staring out the kitchen window, and interspersed with the more conventional activist documentary footage about South African AIDS activism and global pharmaceutical projects are domestic scenes of Bordowitz on his computer, mowing the lawn, and hanging out with his girlfriend Claire in bed and in the backyard. A recurrent image is that of the many pills that he takes every day. Presenting habit as both

a problem and a solution, the video explores ways of reworking habit in relation to daily life. While habit can take you away from paying attention to the world, and Bordowitz is quite open about his depressive anomie, he also considers the ways that habits such as art and meditation can foster agency and will. As he embarks on the weekly ritual of placing his pills into the large plastic container that organizes them by day and time, he explains that the regularized compartments help to relieve “stress and worry” that he might otherwise have about whether he’s taken all of his meds (figure 3.13).

Habit also takes on the problems of incommensurability that are present in *War on Worries*, risking the disparity between Bordowitz’s domestic life in Chicago, which, however routinized, includes the comforts of groceries in the kitchen and daily pills that can be taken, and the realities of life for HIV survivors in other parts of the world. It moves between the daily life of AIDS as chronic disease in Chicago and the global AIDS conference in South Africa in 2000, the activism of Zackie Achmat and Treatment Action Coalition, and the urgency of a widespread pandemic whose face has shifted considerably from the days of North American queer AIDS activism in the 1980s. Rather than offer some reassuring solution to the question of how to connect these worlds, Bordowitz makes no synthetic links and instead underscores the “impasse” of his own quest for agency and meaning and the smallness of his contact with a South African movement. He remains modest in his goals, enacting depression as the failure to be able to mediate between widely disparate worlds. South African AIDS activism represents both an exhilarating moment of possibility, including its significance as a resurgence and expansion of AIDS activism, and a daunting challenge, given the widespread nature of the pandemic, the economic inequities it foregrounds, and the need to develop new activist strategies.

In refusing to mediate between these disparate realities or to offer some neat solution, *Habit* remains both emotionally and intellectually honest, and not without its utopian moments. The most hopeful moments in the films include not just the heady triumphs of a new South African AIDS activist movement at the World AIDS conference in Durban in 2000, but also the depiction of daily practices of survival in Bordowitz’s immediate vicinity, which combine art and spirituality in suggestive ways. Bordowitz’s partner, Claire Pentecost, is seen both making



3.13 Gregg Bordowitz,
stills from *Habit*, 2001.

art in her studio and practicing kundalini yoga, and Bordowitz also continues an ongoing conversation about art and mortality with Yvonne Rainer (an older mentor to Bordowitz not only as an artist but as a long-time cancer survivor) that was also part of *Fast Trip, Long Drop*.

In one of the video's final scenes, longtime friends and fellow AIDS activists Daniel Wolfe and Richard Elovich talk about their regular practice of morning prayer as they lounge in their meditation nook, which includes an altar of photos and spiritual icons. Their spiritual practice is not presented as a perfect solution or transcendent moment; rather it is embedded in daily life and is discussed in modest terms. Their practice of praying together is "like taking a morning swim," and Richard describes prayer as necessary to his sobriety but also jokingly mentions praying for safety when copping drugs as an addict. Emphasizing the ephemeral, Daniel describes "moments of spiritual connection" as "fragile like dreams," as "powerful but precious and breakable," and as something that can't "withstand the scrutiny or skepticism" of others and around which he draws a protective circle in order to preserve it as meaningful. Through their comments, Bordowitz dares to combine spirituality and politics, so often seen as mutually exclusive realms of personal and social transformation, and moreover does so in a way that doesn't suggest that the viewer has to share a set of beliefs or belong to a particular tradition or collective to be able to understand these practices.

Indeed, we don't know if Bordowitz himself agrees with the artists and activists he documents; he uses video to combine different perspectives and vastly different worlds so as to create a "cosmology for [him]self" and to be able to "understand [his] own historical present." In 2000, his personal "cosmology" encompasses both Kofi Annan addressing the United Nations about the global pandemic and footage of himself at the kitchen counter pouring a glass of orange juice and swallowing pills while he waits for the coffee to brew in his own version of the forms of repetition that Richard Elovich describes as one of the attractions of prayer, which works because, not unlike a pill, he says, "[It is] something literal in my hand that I could hold onto." Bordowitz's notion of cosmology is another way to describe how capitalism feels; his process involves gathering bits and pieces (or an archive) that are important to him, not creating a master narrative of neoliberalism or pious injunctions to political activism. Depression is far too thin and

undescriptive a term for what it means to live with AIDS (and AIDS activism) in a globalizing culture.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE (OR, THE SACRED EVERYDAY)

I don't believe in The Rapture
 Don't want to go flying through the air
 Leaving my friends all here behind
 Turning my back on humankind.
 Why don't we stay here and try to make things work?

—Gretchen Phillips, "In Case of Rapture"

My invocation of the concept of *spiritual practice* as a version of the *utopia of ordinary habits* and a possible response to political depression will no doubt be troubling to some readers, given the resolute secularism of so many academics.⁵⁰ But the persistent presence of the category of *spirituality* across my argument—not just in Bordowitz's *Habit*, but in Cassian on acedia and Jacqui Alexander on the pedagogy of the sacred—signals the failure of conventional ways of linking emotion and politics and also names different ways of connecting them. As "something literal in my hand I could hold on to," prayer or spiritual practice is often a very ordinary form of sustenance, a small gesture of faith or hope in the midst of prohibitive circumstances.

For those who are skeptical of matters spiritual, there are many ways to demystify the concept of *spiritual practice*. It may be easier to think of it as daily habit or in terms of the more secular category of *creative practice*. Its ties to the ordinary and the repetitive and its fragile and ephemeral presence in places where feelings of despair and hopelessness are also powerfully present suggest that it is not necessarily a form of transcendence or escape from the messy realities of the here and now. Like creative practice, spiritual practice is a daily activity whose meaning resides in the process itself, not in results that happen somewhere else. Because spiritual practice involves forms of embodiment or rituals with physical dimensions—lighting a candle, chanting a mantra, sitting in silence—it can be described in sensory and affective terms. Although spiritual practice can take the form of becoming aware of a spiritual presence or divinity that is immanent in the present or in ordi-

nary experience, moments of spiritual transcendence are often simply moments of heightened feeling, both psychic and somatic.

Yet even as the spiritual is rendered ordinary through notions of habit and practice, such demystifications don't capture its full resonance if they ultimately secularize the spiritual and take away its qualities of enchantment and magic.⁵¹ Instead, to invoke again Jacqui Alexander's question from the previous chapter, what would it mean to take spirituality seriously in academic scholarship? Why does it keep appearing so insistently amid this project's efforts to view depression through the lens of public feelings? As a category often taken up by those who reject organized religion, spirituality can seem insufficiently orthodox for those who embrace a particular religious tradition, irrationally superstitious for those who are avowed secularists, and wildly ungrounded or touchy-feely to both. Frequently associated with cultures that are deemed premodern or outside modernity, spirituality comes under suspicion as a domain of cultural otherness that is either inaccessible to secular modern subjects or appropriated by those attracted to its exoticism. The "new age" cultures of white middle-class spirituality are an especially easy target for critique on the grounds of cultural appropriation, as well as individualism, consumerism, and sentimentality.⁵²

Yet, cordoning off white middle-class spirituality from serious consideration can perpetuate problematic racial divides as much as it calls attention to them. Spiritual practices have often been placed outside the domain of organized religion because they have been literally condemned or suppressed or have been the subject of an epistemic violence that doesn't grant them the status of religion. Responses to colonialism present in African diasporic practices, syncretic versions of Catholicism and indigenous cultures, and the reclamation and preservation of indigenous ways of thinking, all of which trouble any strict equivalence of modernity and secularism, suggest the intersections of spiritual practice and affective politics. Rather than being cause for critique, the ongoing impact of such traditions and practices in mainstream popular culture indicates the salience of those traditions, an investigation of which entails attention to feeling. Given how common yoga and Buddhist meditation, new world Catholicisms, African diaspora practices, and indigenous spiritualities have become for many people (including, whether they publicly articulate it or not, lots of academics), standing alongside trips to the gym and the therapist as part of the practices of

daily life, it seems inadequate to dismiss them as forms of cultural appropriation.

Indeed, spirituality stands at the conceptual crossroads of distinctions between the religious and the secular that are central to histories of feeling and the public sphere. The history of affect is a history of secularization (and vice versa), which includes the processes through which religious feeling got transferred to sanctioned forms of feeling within the home, the family, and the marketplace (and the truth of deep personal feelings came to replace the feeling of connection to God).⁵³ If the attention to the affective, as opposed to rational, public sphere that has been enabled by gender studies is to complete its project, it must consider the residual forms of religious feeling in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century cultures of sentimentality and abolition that promoted a humanism of fellow feeling. Another important arena for discussions of religion and emotional life is the contemporary moral panics around sexuality that, as queer scholars have suggested, indicate that the state is far from secular.⁵⁴ Spirituality often takes the form of the return of the repressed, emerging in cultural formations where distinctions between the religious and the secular are messy or unresolved or breaking down.⁵⁵ Although still at the margins even of scholarship on religion and affect, spirituality shares with these categories the capacity to put pressure on the category of the secular. Scholarship in religious studies often remains secular and critical in its perspective, even as it pursues important work in folding religion into culture, but another direction for inquiry would be to hold on to forms of "enchantment" (and other related feelings) rather than demystifying religion as cultural expression.

My aim here is to suspend the tendency to dismiss spirituality, even in its "new age" manifestations, in order to reckon with the resources it has to offer for Public Feelings. The spiritual can help articulate a politics of feeling that is manifest not just in the overt or visible social movements of conventional politics but in the more literal kinds of movement that make up everyday life practices or forms of cultural expression. Thinking about everyday habit and spiritual practice together provides resources for thinking about depression as a problem that requires new ways of living. Embracing their connection obviates the need to apologize for or excise the spiritual resonances that often accompany utopian claims for the aesthetic or performative as an alterna-

tive form of politics.⁵⁶ The ways of living cultivated by spiritual practice may entail significant social transformation, but they are also practices of the body, which are available in the here and now. Spiritual practice consists of attention to the present and awareness of or orientation toward it as immanently meaningful or sufficient. Such awareness may resemble a version of modernist epiphany, which, like women's culture, is another long-standing laboratory for this concept. But the ordinary is extraordinary in a full range of places, from the popular or everyday to elite culture, whereas modernist practices, in the process of converting everyday experience into aesthetic form, often take the ordinary out of the extraordinary.⁵⁷

Connecting the spiritual with the everyday helps transform the model, so central to cultural studies, and sometimes so hard to avoid, of assuming that the expression of feeling has to become something else to make it count as political—that it is the first step or the raw material for social change, or an individual experience that has to become collective to matter. When the spiritual, like utopia, is conceived of not as transcendent but as available here and now (through practice) and, analogously, when social critique does not take the form of looking for a deeper meaning or a “real” politics that lies elsewhere, emotional expression doesn't have to be converted to something else called “politics” to be meaningful.

Spiritual practice is also a way of becoming open to what we don't know. It's often described as a way to connect to that which is beyond or larger than the self (although sometimes divinity is said to be immanent or present within the self and daily experience) and hence as that which exceeds our current thinking (although the unknown might be manifest as a feeling). Spiritual experience or practice lends itself to ways of thinking and feeling that differ from the usual model of cultural criticism, which demands that we be able to track the concrete steps that connect the emotional and the political. In spiritual practice one cultivates a willingness to encounter impasse or lack of knowledge, to not know how things will turn out and to go with that feeling, to practice accepting or welcoming it rather than being scared by it. (The embrace of fear, or anxiety, or not knowing is central to the popular Buddhism of, for example, Pema Chödrön and Thich Nhat Hanh and is also described in compelling ways by Eve Sedgwick.)⁵⁸

In *Habit*, the visual artist Claire Pentecost is seen practicing a kundalini yoga meditation called *sat kriya*, which includes recitation of the mantra *sat nam* (truth is my identity). In the kundalini tradition, meditation is considered to be a spiritual technology, one that involves mind and body and the energetic centers that combine them. The chanting of the mantra that creates mental concentration is accompanied by clasping the hands over the head (which can be very tiring) and a sharp pumping of the navel point, which affects all of the organs and facilitates the fuller breathing that opens up not just the mind but a spiritual body that is dispersed across the seven energy centers, or chakras. I recognized Pentecost's meditation practice because it's the same one I do every morning for eleven minutes in order to prepare for the day. It helps with the war on worries by honing my attention, not only pulling it away from the distractions of so many things to do and the disasters in the world, but also setting me up to be oriented toward them in a calmer way. It is a technology for developing spiritual warriors who will have the sensory tools (both cognitive and emotional, both mental and physical) to focus and be present even in times of crisis. But it has to be repeated every day because the lesson is never done—the mind will always wander, the body will be blocked by stress, the spirit will be dampened.

I have found intellectual support for the value of the concept of spirituality in the disparate archive of fellow travelers I have assembled for this project. The fourth-century desert monk Cassian writing on *acedia* as one of the deadly sins offers a remarkably accessible account of the despair that can plague the modern intellectual or activist who loses faith in a particular project or set of ideals. Jacqui Alexander speaks of the “disconnection” that is the postcolonial condition and the sacred practices that can heal both writer's block and a daily sense of despair. It is not surprising that the early Christian ascetic and the contemporary postcolonial intellectual would both point in the direction of the spiritual, since both belong to traditions that have been shaped by and on the margins of Western secular understandings of the rational. In order to retrieve the spiritual, we often have to look to both geographic and historical peripheries and to vernacular practices that have been cast as irrational and superstitious. Along with the feminist crafter, the early Christian ascetic and the postcolonial intellectual provide forms

of knowledge that are not scientific, knowledges that come from the body and from practices rather than texts, as well as from immaterial sources that some would call the domain of spirit.

These disparate sources of wisdom have helped me see how the combined forces of the ordinary and the spiritual can be an antidote to despair, alienation, and depression. The labor of habit or practice—gathering palm leaves, performing rituals from diasporic and indigenous traditions, knitting and crocheting, writing—forges new understandings of the political. It also generates a reparative relation to depression and alternatives to the medical model of depression as something to be diagnosed and known. The experience of depression or being stuck can be an invitation to that which we don't yet know and a way of reminding us why cultural studies matters. Like spiritual practice, creative practice—and scholarship as creative practice—involves not knowing, trusting to process and to a holistic intelligence that encompasses body, mind, and senses in order to see what happens, rather than having an answer to writing a dissertation, transforming depression, or planning a life.

Epilogue



Lynda Barry, *What It Is*.

IS THIS GOOD? DOES THIS SUCK?

Is this good? Does this suck? I'm not sure when these two questions became the only two questions I had about my work, or when making pictures and stories turned into something I called "my work"—I just know I'd stopped enjoying it and instead began to dread it.

—Lynda Barry, *What It Is*, 123

These two questions constitute a refrain in *What It Is*, Lynda Barry's how-to manual for writers, which is also a meditation on the creative process, a memoir about her own development as an artist, a philosophical inquiry into how memory is embedded in places that are "spots of time" out of which images emerge, and a genre-bending graphic narrative in which the relation between text and drawing is integral to the