

SLUG

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SLUG is a drawing that I made in my residency at the Women’s Art Library (WAL), Goldsmiths, University of London as a result of an ‘Art in the Archive Bursary’, a collaboration between the Women’s Art Library and *Feminist Review*. The theme of the bursary was ‘A Slow Return’. The drawing is almost five metres long, made on tracing paper with marker pen and watercolour paint. Each slug contains or is made up of fragmented quotes from artists I came across in the Women’s Art Library, as well as my own reflections on time, work and art-making. I share some images from *SLUG* here (photographs by Jordan Taylor), along with a poetic and reflective text that I wrote and was read aloud at an event that also included an in-conversation with the artist and writer Abi Palmer, celebrating the results of the bursary.

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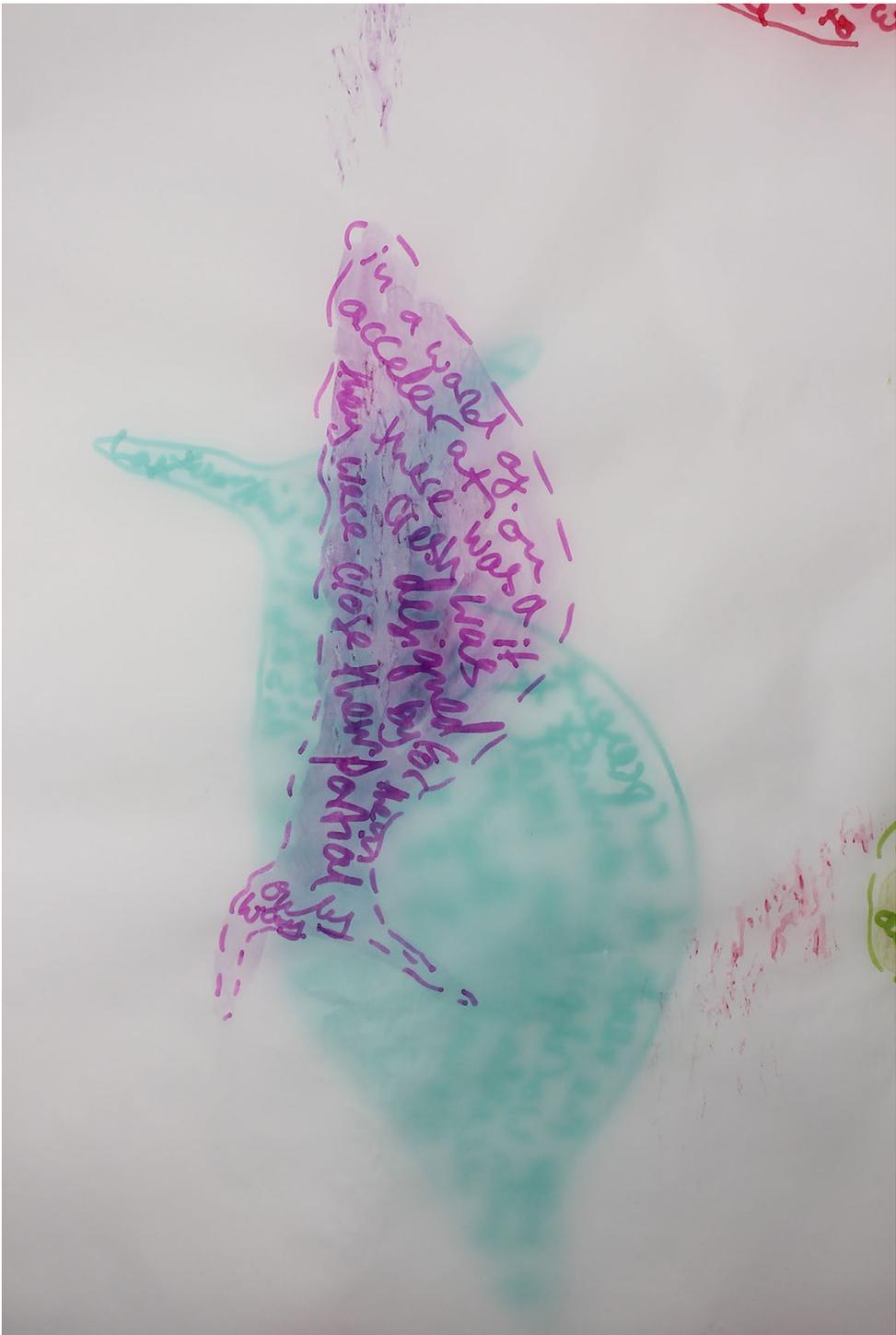
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From this came the understanding that our histories, our futures were everywhere.

Emily Hesse, *Black Birds Born from Invisible Stars* (2018, n.p.)

I only met Emily Hesse once in person, but it's not hyperbolic to say she had an immeasurable effect on me. She was powerful, in a soft power way. I don't mean soft like the soft power used to manipulate international relations, but soft like the kind that is shared with and directed at the right people and places, and that knows when to 'shovel the shit upward' too, as my ex-collaborator Kerri Jefferis always says.

Emily was an artist, she worked in clay, set up a pottery where she worked with refugees in Middlesbrough amidst their major demonisation in the regional press. She ran as a local councillor to try to make Labour more lefty and northern again, fought arms manufacturers that wanted to art wash their money through the Great Exhibition of the North, and championed working-class women in the North East so incredibly hard. She had cancer and died way too young; she was a witch.

In the quote above, Emily is talking specifically about trying to dig out of a landscape a lineage you can see yourself in, and the trickiness of doing so when you come from a place where that excavation is inextricably linked in itself to extraction, expansion, exploitation. And is written about, historicised and described by everyone but people like you. Our unavoidable entanglements with our contexts, harder powers and histories.

Reading her words again in the Women's Art Library last year, amongst those of Li Cassidy, Sheena Patel, Rita Keegan, Nyapanyapa Yunupingu, Lee Lozano, Shaheen Merali, Elena Gaputytyé, Lesley Kerman, Linda Nochlin, Kelly Kaufman, the Icelandic Love Corporation, Deirdre Logue, Allison Mitchell, Samia Malik, the Women of Colour Index Reading Group, Nina Edge, Pratibha Parmer, Jutapa Biswas, Marlene Smith, Monica Ross, Ingrid Pollard, Maud Sulter, Lubiana Himid, the women of Greenham Common, Charlotte Cooper, Jo Spence, Alia Syed, Disability Arts Magazine, GLC Handbooks and Brixton Women Artists Group and more... I felt that our histories and our futures were everywhere.

Many of these women I'd long admired, seen the work of, and read about, but there were many whom I'd never heard of or been shown before, and I felt a sense of collective shame. All of them deserve more attention.

I had gone into this bursary with the Women's Art Library and *Feminist Review* with the idea that I wanted to slow down. 'I need slowness', I wrote, 'I want to go slow and low, like a slug – taking in what it comes across as it comes across it' (another lovely turn of phrase I owe to Kerri). I'd been going fast for the past fifteen years, speeding along – gathering, producing, bid-writing, facilitating, organising, learning, space holding, (trying to) make art, barely stopping. Linking up with other speed demons, trying to deliberately turn against the tides, to protect an ever-shrinking space of possibility for 'othered' kinds of people to make other things possible. The lockdowns gave many of us new pause, but by 2023 I'd already felt that acceleration creep back in and I wanted to use the bursary as an opportunity to be still, and to resource myself better by seeing how other artists that also wanted to refuse extraction, expansion, exploitation – and often as an (you tell me?) unfortunate by-product refuse fame and fortune too – managed to do things. How did they sustain their lives, their health, their communities, care for the kids and each other, campaign against oppressive forces – and make affecting and expansive art?

Starting each day, standing in between the shelves, I'd sing a slug meditation (the 'rushing song') to only myself and the boxes. Then I'd take the most delicious, sluggy *dérive*, as it were, through the

archives. I tried not to get in my own way by ascribing too many systems to what I picked up, other than being especially curious about boxes that weren't yet filed, transparencies that hadn't found mounts, unidentified envelopes tucked inside other books, and names that I hadn't heard of before but saw a resonance with those I had. Slug-like, I went with what could nourish me. I was looking for clues of cracks. Glimpses of the conditions of lives lived with art-making amidst them, reflections on what made the imaginative, radical propositions and playful encounters possible, and what got in the way. Amongst the sketchbooks with pages stuck to one another, photocopied handouts with the ink barely visible anymore and resonant thinking through making, that chimed inside me like a bell ringing, I found – as Abi Palmer (2024) has coined – ‘the slug as interloper’. Many, many interloping slugs. Artists making and sharing in their own ways, in places they might not be totally wanted, sometimes met with puzzled responses or even disgust. Going at their own pace, moving through institutions, public spaces, collectives, galleries, books, studios, and kitchen tables that cut a new path whilst leaving a slimy trail for others to follow and find. Slugs battling with the toughness of doing it with others, stopping and starting again, fitting it in alongside other careers and personal and societal madneses and responsibilities. Sharing that struggle, not hiding it away or pretending it's not actually what they spend the majority of their time slowly manoeuvring around.

It's now been one year since my time at the archive, and in this time I really actually learnt about slowness. My partner had an injury at the end of last year that meant it was pretty impossible for them to move without pain, walk longer than five minutes, or do much of their life in the way they did before. Taking time to care for them was a pretty abrupt and enforced stopping to our usual pace. Whilst the need for our freelance commitments steamrolled on, we were sharply faced with the ableism of our previous speed and the precarity folded into what made that possible. In this time since, of their slow recovery, it was always our disabled and ill pals, our pals with kids or who've cared for relatives, the queers at the sharp end of capitalism, the ones invested in the work it takes to sustain people other than themselves, that really got it. Didn't even need to ask. They were round cooking, sharing medication, giving advice on physios, and they were the ones who reminded me to take breaks from caring, to do things that bring me back to my art and to myself.

I know now that I had fetishised slowness before I knew what it meant to have it enforced upon you. And those in my life whose reality has and will always be closer to the slug's pace embraced me in the knowledge that to be alive, to be a body, is to at some point be faced with slowing. It seems obvious to say that the certainty of being alive means that at some point we won't be. This is obviously always present, but the work and life of anyone othered seems to shine a light more brightly on this. Much like slugs (as Abi beautifully explores in her manifesto [Palmer, 2024]) people can fear looking at this fact and being reminded by all of us of it. ‘Have no shame for the marks of your wetness’ (Palmer, 2024).

Maybe as artists we are trying in our making to reproduce ourselves out of this deal. Birthing, rebirthing, making and remaking. To be a ‘good’ artist under capitalism, the capitalistic death drive would have you believe you must do this *ad infinitum*, exploiting yourself and each other to death. This push and pull could have a lot to do with the sense of urgency I've become so accustomed to in order to develop my practice over these years. But in the archive, and over the last year since, I've realised or remembered: there is always the same amount of time. It's the way we approach it that gives the quality of speed or slowness. The slugs don't know they are going slow, they are just going.

Much like the making this other kind of art and life we are trying for, the acceptance of time can feel incredibly calming, and also infuriating. Especially when there are such strong forces outside of our

control pulling us around and telling us otherwise. But if we can stick with slug-like desire and hold firm together, maybe we have more of a choice to set the pace we need?

Archives to me feel like they have a similar battle within them, about what has been and what is now, what was here and what has gone, what was alive and what's now dead. The Women's Art Library is quite special in that it doesn't just house the work of artists from the past but is continually archiving what's also being produced now, putting these works in dialogue with one another. Drawing slime trails back and forth in a lattice between all of our work. I'm imagining us all now emerging from the dirt, like slugs after a big downpour of rain. Once you see one of us, you spot a couple more, and a couple more, 'til us and our trails are everywhere.

There's a fear present in archival work. I think about things getting forgotten or lost. I felt a sadness that many of the names I mentioned earlier maybe aren't known far and wide. Not all of these artists will be historicised or canonised, but they actually don't need to be. They meant and still mean immeasurable amounts to the people who have come into contact with them, however localised and contextual and messy that was. Crawling over one another's artwork, sucking things up from all of our trying, learning, living, sliming, sometimes in quiet, unwanted or unexpected corners – to make new and other conglomerations of all of this, to pass on to future slugs and so on. As I have been – galvanised and encouraged to keep going, at whatever our pace, rich in the complex and indelible trails we leave on each other that make all our different and multiple futures more possible. Whether we know those lineages or not.

The last messages Emily Hesse and I sent to each other before she died were well before she even got sick. I had just written a text about leaving a community arts project after my first experience of deep burn-out which I cited her in, and she had just published her book from a similarly charged and hot-inside-her place. I had messaged her: 'Power to writing ourselves into history', to which she replied, 'Exactly. Once you start it doesn't stop'.

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Author biography

Sophie Patricia Chapman is an interdisciplinary artist and organiser from Newcastle, living and working in London. I make experimental drawings, performances, videos, music and writing. Alongside this, I'm an experienced facilitator, producer and access support worker. All my work is connected by a desire for, and a drive to create, more supportive, politicised and experimental structures for people to make and share the world. Drawn to phenomena or experiences I find hard to grasp or articulate, I make art as a way to learn. Often working in collaboration with other people, I enjoy creating tools and processes that draw our ideas into dialogue and relationship with one another, trying for more complex, plural ways of being. This work takes me through sprawling research connections and resonances across pseudo-science, linguistics, internet philosophy, queer theory, feminist practice, somatics, pop culture, music and staying with the trouble of doing things in community. Previous projects have played with science fiction, punk, improvisation, embodied knowledge and spatial justice. Currently I'm obsessed with making drawings, moving and writing about dissociation and working on a performance installation about queerness, oblivion and nature. <https://www.sophiechapman.com>