



Xpace Cultural Centre  
2-303 Lansdowne Ave  
Toronto ON M6K 2W5  
416 849 2864  
Tuesday-Saturday 12-6  
[www.xpace.info](http://www.xpace.info)

### **As I Live & Breathe**

Curated by Christina Oyawale

Featuring works by Emkay Adjei-Manu, Bel Andrade, Atanas Bozdarov, Hannah Bullock, Breanne Jeethan and Tee Kundu

May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2022 – July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2022

Who is allowed access to the public sphere and how can bodies traditionally deemed apolitical operate politically within private space?

How do we as disabled, neurodivergent and Mad individuals create space where the non-visible can be visible?

How do we approach the act of documenting our physical limitations by taking hold of our body-mind autonomy?

We have been let down by the structural systems upheld by ableism, which prevent us from accessing adequate health care, schooling, and communal spaces. As disabled artists, in order to imagine new worlds where our body-minds are celebrated, we have come to explore these topics through imaging futures for ourselves. How are we challenging a neurotypical and ableist world? By existing. And by existing we take hold of our narratives and stories, which can then be passed down to our kin as a means of reminding them that disability is not a dirty word but something that should be celebrated.

Disability has always been seen as taboo or something to fear in the eyes of our ableist and capitalist world. I wanted to curate *As I Live & Breathe* to showcase the complexities of occupying space as disabled person. Disabled people are not a monolith, narratives about our lives have been created without our consent by able-bodied people. This is why it is important for us to continue to create art that speaks to our realities as disabled, neurodivergent, Mad, d/Deaf and visually impaired individuals. As a curator and artist committed to representation and interdependence as a means of strengthening the arts community, I find myself constantly inspired by my artistic peers and elders. The words of activists and artists such as Mia Mingus, Alice Wong, Gloria Swain and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha are instrumental in the conception of the exhibition. They remind me of the complexities of disability narratives and how the general population of able-bodied people in power continuously make decisions that directly impact our qualities of life; specifically whether we live or die. Due to this, it has forced us to create safe spaces and communities that center care, bodily agency and support. This becomes even more urgent when considering the sociopolitical conditions created by neoliberalism and how they interact with disability; immigration status, race, gender and sexuality. In a blog post from her website *Changing the Framework: Disability Justice*, Mia Mingus stated: that we must be “engaged in building an understanding of disability that is more complex, whole and interconnected than what we have previously found. We are disabled people who are people of color; women, genderqueer and transgender; poor and working class; youth; immigrants; lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer; and more”<sup>1</sup>. This best represents all the artists involved in *As I Live & Breathe*. In the exhibit, they have vulnerably shared pieces of themselves as a political and communal act. By bringing these artists together, we are sharing our stories as a community that is forgotten and silenced.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mia Mingus, “How our communities can move beyond access to wholeness”, *Changing the Framework: Disability Justice*, February 12, 2011, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/02/12/changing-the-framework-disability-justice/>.

These things inevitably impact how we see ourselves represented in the world. For instance, when examining the experiences of each artist in the exhibition, I found how vastly different but how similar many of their experiences were. Emkay Adjei-Manu's *bricks in my living room* demonstrates the effects of disability and mental health on non-binary/transgender Black people and women, particularly the lack of care and autonomy that is afforded to them due to institutional racism and the health industrial complex. I find myself struck by the importance of showcasing narratives and experiences that differ in relation to disability and access because the idea of access has been lost in the idea that there is a one-size-fit-all solution. While interacting with Adjei-Manu's work, I was brought back to the words of Black disabled artist Gloria Swain from her text *The Healing Power of Art in Intergenerational Trauma: Race, Sex, Age and Disability*: "[applying a] political and activist lens to think about disability arts and its potential role [opens up] a necessary conversation around how madness is produced by experiences of racism, poverty, sexism, and intergenerational trauma within the Black community."<sup>2</sup>

Adjei-Manu's collages illustrate "relationships to intimate spaces while living through experiences of Madness."<sup>3</sup> They question "What stories of madness do our interior spaces hold? and how much life is actually held in our living rooms?"<sup>4</sup> in order to come to an understanding of what disability looks like from their perspective. In the meanwhile, artists' Bell Andrade's *Studies in Intentional Syncope*, Hannah Bullock's *a low hum, a strong gale* and Breanne Jeethan's *Women's Health* actively investigate the health industrial complex, gender identity and invisible disabilities. Throughout *As I Live & Breathe*, the artists perform for the camera, they perform for society and for a better understanding in which the circumstances they live. The artists' works do not seek to exist as a transaction with the viewer but rather invites further dialogue surrounding ableism and human existence. Audiences are tasked with questioning how the conditions of ableism affect us all.

---

<sup>2</sup> Gloria Swain, "The Healing Power of Art in Intergenerational Trauma." *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 8, no. 1 (2019): 15–31. <https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v8i1.469>.

<sup>3</sup> Emkay Adjei-Manu, in conversation with artist.

<sup>4</sup> Emkay Adjei-Manu, in conversation with artist.

When it comes down to the idea of access and representation, I believe it is more important to bring experiences and stories that focus on dismantling everything we have come to know that actively perpetuates harm to marginalized communities. By dismantling the “limited-and-limiting mentality that just showing the work of a disabled artist is ‘enough’”, space is created for disabled artists to expand upon their practices and the complexities they choose to explore in their practices<sup>5</sup>. The wider art communities at large fail to acknowledge the necessity of disability narratives from an artistic perspective and not a passive audience perspective. Access on its own should exist as the idea of liberation of disabled people, [not] through logistical [means], but through justice, interdependence and collective care<sup>6</sup>.

- Christina Oyawale

---

5

<sup>6</sup> Mia Mingus, “How our communities can move beyond access to wholeness”, Changing the Framework: Disability Justice, February 12, 2011, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/02/12/changing-the-framework-disability-justice/>.