CAROLYN LAZARD:

Support System
(for Tina, Park, and Bob)

Sunday, October 30, 2016

Room & Board
Williamsburg, Brooklyn

On Carolyn Lazard's *Support System (for Tina, Park, and Bob)*

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Julia Pelta Feldman

Carolyn during *Support System.*

Carolyn Lazard's new work *Support System (Tina, Park, and Bob)* is a blatant attempt by the artist to get what she needs under the guise of art. The necessity of this project points to

both the insufficiency of the society in which she lives and to art's potential to transcend the structures of that society. As realized this past Sunday here at Room & Board, an artist's residency that is also my home, *Support System* was a durational performance during which the artist, confined to her bed, received a succession of visitors—friends, collaborators, strangers—who provided for her physical and emotional needs throughout the day. This work is part of our shared interest in using art in the service of life, and part of Carolyn's ongoing effort to, as she has said, "make art that doesn't hurt me."

The work was both rigorously choreographed and unplanned, if not disorganized. Its stiff structure was a vessel into which fluid encounters could be poured. The piece was set to begin at 9:00 a.m. and end at 9:00 p.m. Performance slots or appointments (Carolyn and I struggled to find the right term) were each 30 minutes, and so 24 people signed up via an online platform to take part. Each viewer/visitor was required to arrive ten minutes in advance of their appointment and to bring a bouquet of flowers as an offering or payment (only one visitor arrived without a bouquet; she was gently sent back out into the world to acquire one).

As a sort of administrator for the project, I followed a particular routine: I welcomed each visitor and offered them tea and cof-

fee, inviting them to sit down on the sofa. There, a coffee table proffered a plate of cookies and a selection of books Carolyn had chosen on art, medicine, disability, and the body. My outfit—a cozy cardigan over a button-down shirt and tie—was meant to communicate a mix of homey warmth and efficient officialdom. I made a fuss over each bouquet and brought it into the kitchen, where I cut and arranged the flowers into one of the 24 vases I had on hand.

When it was time, I led the visitor upstairs, carrying their bouquet, and knocked on the door to Carolyn's bedroom. When she said, "Come in," I opened the door to allow the visitor to enter before me. Carolyn greeted each visitor prone on her bed. I showed her the flowers they had brought, inviting her to respond to them with ostentatious gratitude, before placing them on her desk, where they steadily accumulated throughout the day. As I discreetly shut the door behind me, I heard Carolyn ask if the visitor would like to take off their shoes and join her in bed. Half an hour later, I returned to gently but firmly inform the visitor that their time was up. The next was generally already downstairs, drinking their tea.

This describes the structure of *Support System*, but not its texture. Each encounter was left open. Visitors were asked to help Carolyn with her needs—to bring her food or medicine from the

kitchen, for example—but Carolyn was actually most concerned with providing care for those who came to see her. Her hope was to divine what they needed—a nap, a tarot reading, a series of stretches—and offer it to them. As the day went on, Carolyn became increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of asking visitors to do things for her. A bag of laundry she had specifically assembled for that purpose remained unwashed. Yet my impression is that those who felt they were really helping her found this rare and special experience meaningful and restorative.

Everyone needs care, but Carolyn has, in a sense, a privileged perspective on its significance. Carolyn is chronically ill. That Carolyn often "passes" as a well person is part of the reason that she addresses illness and debility in her art: in order to make it visible. It is the reason that she chose a classic invalid's uniform—an antiseptically white robe and matching slippers—as her costume for *Support System*.

As an old friend of Carolyn's—we attended high school together—I am very glad that her current strategic system of drugs, supplements, alternative therapies, restricted diet, support networks, self-knowledge, and luck allows her to eat, move, sleep, laugh, talk, think, walk, write, date, and hang out with me, though she can't do many of those things the way she would

like to. But she is still sick, and she will always be sick. Carolyn has an autoimmune disorder that curtails the time and energy she has for work as well as for socializing, for employers as well as family. In that sense, *Support System* is a frame that allows Carolyn to be "productive" (to make an artwork) while spending time with friends she might not otherwise be able to see. That Carolyn spent all day in bed is therefore both an instance of needed rest and the conspicuous performance of that need.

Nonetheless, *Support System* was exhausting. One participant noted that it was a marathon of "affective labor," the kind that is least valued in our society, and that is (perhaps not coincidentally) most often performed by women. It was twelve solid hours of work, which Carolyn interrupted only to use the bathroom. The endurance aspect of the piece inevitably summons specters of Marina Abramović, who notoriously abstained even from that—using the bathroom, that is—during her 2010 performance *The Artist is Present*, effectively enshrining endurance as an aesthetic achievement. Yet what Abramović's piece shows even more is how the artist today is expected to sacrifice her well-being to provide a nebulous, quasi-spiritual experience of presentness to an audience that is ravenously hungry for it. Suffering for art is nothing new, of course; it was a Romantic trope long before Kafka's 1922 *Ein Hungerkünstler*, in which a proto-Abramovićian figure publicly fasts for the entertainment of his

audience. Carolyn's work asks us to find new models for artist and public beyond those of service provider and consumer. *Support System* revolved, as does Carolyn's practice writ large, around care, dependency, and exchange, and their important yet uneasy relations with each other.

Dependence is at the center of Carolyn's practice: on drugs, on medical intervention, and especially on other people. Eva Feder Kittay has critiqued the disability rights movement of the 1990s for its insistence on independence for the disabled, for its embrace of an ideal that is not attainable—perhaps not even desirable—for the non-disabled.[1] Carolyn's call for us to recognize both the extent and the potential of our dependence on each other is also manifest in her generous sense of artistic lineage.

Carolyn wants us to know that this project could not have existed without others' work, particularly that by Park McArthur, Constantina Zavitsanos, and Bob Flanagan. That is why their names are in the title. Such recognition is generous and brave, but it also reflects a radically "dependent" understanding of cultural production: Carolyn's contribution is not diminished by the recognition that it is the result of something other than pure autonomy; it is enriched, made larger. In particular, she sees Sup-

[1] Kittay, Eva Feder. Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency. New York: Routledge, 1999.

port System as inspired by and in dialogue with Tina and Park's *Care Collective* (2012), a work that uses the framework of art to meet Park's daily needs.[2] With Bob Flanagan, who died when Carolyn was a child, the dialogue can only be one-way, but he is a crucial ancestor in an art history that provides few examples of how to identify at once as artist and invalid. Flanagan brought wit and sincerity to work about living with cystic fibrosis, making public two shockingly personal aspects of his life: the inevitable deterioration of his health and his profound identification with the sexual practices of BDSM. *Support System* is especially inspired by Flanagan's *Visiting Hours: An Installation by Bob Flanagan in collaboration with Sheree Ros*e (1993), in which the artist created a kind of funhouse hospital ward in the Santa Monica Museum of Art and then the New Museum in New

[2] "Care collective is a group of 10 people who coordinate Park McArthur's nightly care routine. The basic function of care collective is to assist in changing Park's clothes and to lift Park in and out of the shower and into bed. This routine is often accompanied by other convivial activities, such as making dinner, drinking, talking, reading, watching YouTube videos, massaging limbs, drawing, videotaping, and sharing stories."
McArthur, Park, and Constantina Zavitsanos. "Other Forms of Conviviality: The Best and Least of Which Is Our Daily Care and the Host of Which Is Our Collaborative Work." Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory 23, no. 1 (March 2013): 126–32.
http://www.womenandperformance.org/ampersand-articles/other-forms-of-conviviality.html.

York, attended and suspended by his Rose, his partner and dom.

That so many artists feel ashamed of and hide their source materials is a product of the insistence on individuality in the art system, if not in the larger culture. When we name names, we work against that. But this act is especially important in the context of disability, which is often defined as futureless. That is to say, it is not only that the sick and disabled are understood to suffer foreshortened lifespans, but also that they are expected not to reproduce, that a future without them will be a better future.[3] Building a lineage for oneself, by inscribing their names into one's work, fights against the prevailing assumption that the sick and disabled exist only in the present moment. It means that we are building on something. Still, it is significant that these works by Carolyn, Tina, and Park, a generation removed from Flanagan, are being staged in domestic spaces rather than art institutions. For them, the work is not only about the performance of care and dependency, but also about the relationships that emerge from our need and bind us together, troubling any

[3] We are so accustomed to lamenting and opposing illness and disability that this can seem reasonable. But we must not allow efforts to mitigate debility—which will always exist, no matter how many diseases we eradicate, as long as we are embodied beings—to position the unwell as lamentable errors in the march of medical progress.

straightforward assumptions about viewer and performer, giver and receiver.

This is a crucial aspect of *Support System*: it is about all of us. Carolyn uses her own experiences and knowledge to gain an understanding of how all of our bodies and minds are abused by a culture that valorizes their overexertion. If *Support System* "tricks" viewers into helping Carolyn fulfill her needs by promising them an art experience, it also tricks them into making time and space for their own well-being by allowing them to think that in sitting quietly with Carolyn, taking a nap, or drinking a cup of tea, they are being asked to take care of her. We are all in need of care, yet it is often easier to give it than to receive it. This is another site of privilege: who is in the vulnerable position of needing care, versus the privileged, one might say philanthropic, position of being able to dispense it. Carolyn's project subtly tweaks that dynamic, allowing viewers to occupy both roles at once.

By the end of the performance on Sunday, the bouquets had grown and merged into the heady mass that we are presenting tonight as a process-based sculpture. They also serve as a form of documentation, but they document more than the performance itself. Carolyn noted the importance of receiving visitors at the hospital, a steady stream of them, so that one's doctors

understand that their patient is a person who matters out in the world, and not only an ailing body. In this sense, the profusion of flowers is a physical proof of those immaterial social ties. It is also a work of art, a sculpture that Carolyn produced through coercive collaboration, through the labor and money of others. Both a warm gesture and a mandatory one, the flowers serve as a metaphor of Carolyn's needs, of her dependence on others to fulfill them, and a reminder that care, like art, is more often exchanged than freely given.

Carolyn arranges the bouquets gathered as part of *Support System.*

Room & Board is an experimental artist's residency and salon that takes place at my apartment here in Williamsburg. Carolyn Lazard developed and performed *Support System (for Tina, Park, and Bob)* during a residency in October, 2016.

Julia Pelta Feldman
Director, Room & Board
153 Bedford Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11211

www.roomandboard.nyc