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KATE JUST

Self Care Action Series

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IMAGES > [Front cover] Kate Just, *Self Care Action Series* (selected works), 2023, hand knitted acrylic yarn, canvas, timber, 55 x 40cm. Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Simon Strong.

IMAGE > Kate Just, *Self Care Action Series: ask for help*, 2023, hand knitted acrylic yarn, canvas, timber, 55 x 40cm. Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Simon Strong.

THE POLITICAL PURPOSE OF SELF-CARE

By Sophia Cai

Dear Kate,

This is my third time writing a text about your work, but my first time writing you a letter. Six years ago, I first met you in your former St Kilda studio, where we spent an hour talking about knitting and feminist art histories. I remember how nervous I was to conduct one of my first long-form artist interviews, but how kind and welcome you made me feel during that hour. I left that day feeling like I'd met someone who would become an important person to me. Sometime between then and now, I asked you to be my mentor. Sometime between then and now, you became my friend.

One of the things I admire most deeply about your practice and life's work as an artist is

that is has been continuously guided by a belief in the transformative power of art as a tool to change the world for better. I too believe in this transformative power of art – as something that is not merely created and consumed by a bourgeoisie class, but as something that belongs to our everyday reality. The ongoing challenge is our existence in neoliberal capitalism where everything we do is measured against a perception of its 'worthiness', whether in dollar amounts or other forms of (cultural) capital. Add to that mix the living conditions you need to viably survive as a creative worker, and this becomes even more contentious.

Your work reminds me of the optimistic potential of art to create new meanings in existing structures. You are the type of artist



IMAGE > Kate Just, *Self Care Action Series* [installation detail] 2023, hand knitted acrylic yarn, canvas, timber, 55 x 40cm. Photograph: Liam James.



IMAGE > Kate Just, *Self Care Action Series* [installation view] 2023, hand knitted acrylic yarn, canvas, timber, 55 x 40cm. Photograph: Liam James.

who practices what you preach, by investing time and energy into actions and outcomes that directly reflect your personal and political values as an artist and activist. Living your truth is, what I've learnt, makes a person admirable. More than any material or stylistic commonality, what makes your work your own is this underlying purpose. I can't imagine you doing anything else.

When artists make so-called political works, it often falls into one of two categories. One is art that is about awareness building and amplification – using the context of a gallery and/or museum space to draw attention to pertinent issues of our time (think Ai Weiwei as a classic example). The other method is political art that spurs political action in the viewer, whether through direct or indirect persuasion (think socially-engaged practice).

Your *Self Care Actions Series* operates on this dual register. The work forms a deeply personal narrative inspired in large part by your own experiences navigating the challenges of the last few years and

experiences of loss and mourning on both an individual and universal level. The forty bright hand-knitted panels in this exhibition communicate different simple actions you take to improve your self-care, and look after your emotional and physical wellbeing. By putting them on display, you are also encouraging and empowering others to undertake these actions too.

I have to admit, I have come to regard the word 'care' with increasing scrutiny and ambivalence, particularly when used by institutional bodies or those in positions of power as words to declare positive intent without follow through actions. This is because care is often not equally distributed, and one's capacity of care (for themselves or others) is highly variable depending on one's level of access and privilege.

Self-care has also been co-opted by the 'global wellness industry', estimated to be worth \$1.5 trillion USD, as another consumable. When the outcomes of self-care become self-indulgent, it also becomes a

means to value one's comfort above others and fail to take accountability. We saw this play out during mass protests against vaccinations and mask-wearing during Covid lockdowns – which quickly deteriorated into a politicised spectacle that saw libertarians and fascists mix with 'wellness warriors.' Why otherwise did Brunswick, an otherwise progressive suburb in Melbourne's inner north, have such a high percentage of unvaccinated folks?

But I digress – my ambivalence on self-care is one that you also share. We have spoken at lengths of the radical roots of self-care in Black and feminist activist movements, because the 'official' structures of care (such as American healthcare systems) continue to fail women and communities of colour. Your artist statement also cites one of our favourite writers, Audre Lorde, who famously said "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." Knowing these radical origins of self-care means we must maintain a critical lens when applying these actions to ourselves and our wellbeing. To resist the commodification of self-care by capitalist

enterprise requires a deep reckoning with the very reason and purpose for this work, and why we do it. We do this work because before we can take care of others and our environment, we must first take care of ourselves. Let's not forget this.

With love,
Sophia

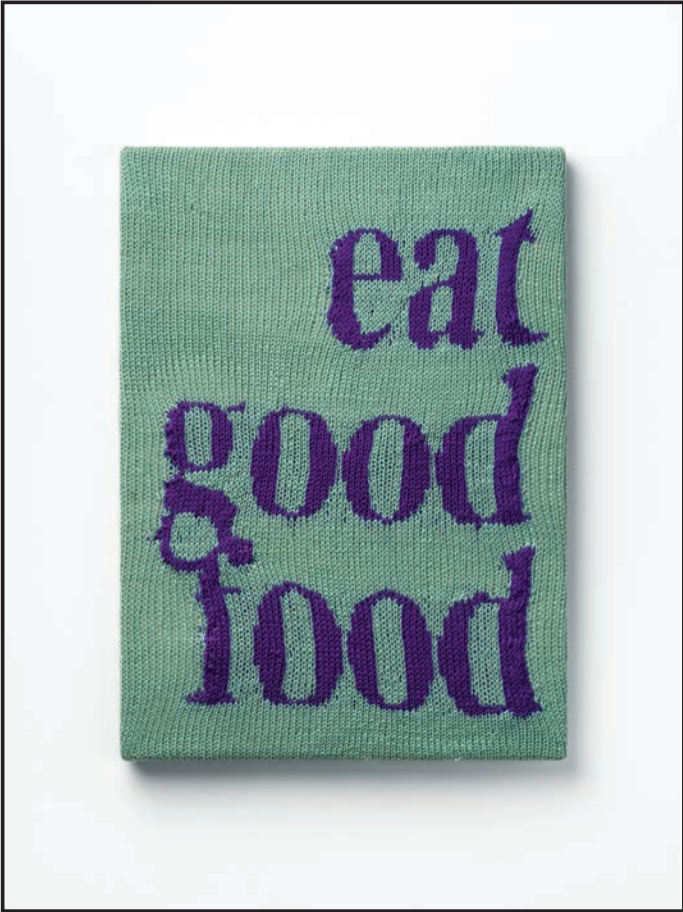


IMAGE > Kate Just, *Self Care Action Series: eat good food*, 2023, hand knitted acrylic yarn, canvas, timber, 55 x 40cm. Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Simon Strong.



IMAGE > Kate Just, *Self Care Action Series* [installation view] 2023, hand knitted acrylic yarn, canvas, timber, 55 x 40cm. Photograph: Liam James.

SELF CARE ACTION SERIES

By Kate Just

Self Care Action Series consists of a series of forty brightly coloured, hand-knitted panels bearing texts relating to self-care actions.

The series arose from my lived experience as a queer feminist, artist teacher, advocate, activist, and parent who dedicates a lot of time working in artworld and real-world contexts to generate social and politic change. In response to a build-up of exhaustion and frustration from so much external action and agitation, I began to formulate texts/actions for myself – to sustain and care for oneself – in difficult times.

Self-care has its roots in radical activism. As a term it dates back to the US based civil rights and women's rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Activist organizations

upset by the ways America's healthcare system was failing marginalized communities set out to give those communities free or low-cost resources to better take care of themselves. In the late 1960s, the Black Panther Party created the first Peoples' Free Medical Clinic as an alternative to hospitals and private care practices. The women's rights movement of the 1970s also provided underserved communities feminist health centres.' Activists preached self-care within communities and practiced it themselves. Writer, feminist, and civil rights activist Audre Lorde famously stated, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."

The knitted Self Care Action panels are all the same size. They are brightly coloured and

deploy the same rounded font. These simple design elements underscore the optimism of the project and the clarity of the actions. Actions from the series include Ask for help, Stay Present, Switch Off Your Phone, Love Yourself, Make Art, Get Into Nature, Feel Your Feelings, Get Therapy, and Say No. The works are shared on Instagram as they are made, through posts about each work, and pictures of me holding each sign up.

Each work is a simple prompt that I consider crucial for my own emotional survival and resilience and an invitation to others to imagine how they might prioritise caring for themselves. These are simple actions that are sometimes hard to do.

Though I initially made the signs to consider how artists and activists can

build emotional resilience to be able to continue doing the work we do, personal circumstances in my own life have continued to shape and inform the work. In the two years leading up to the project I had foster-adopted a second child (a teenager), struggled through two years of pandemic life, had entered menopause, and then, just as I started the series, my dearly loved father died.

Beyond offering the means for taking care of myself as an artist and activist, they also are guiding me with simple reminders how it is possible to survive grief, global upheaval, family stress, and life changes. As I share them with others, I notice that a reminder to love and care for yourself are always welcome.



IMAGE > Kate Just, *Self Care Action Series* [installation detail] 2023, hand knitted acrylic yarn, canvas, timber, 55 x 40cm. Photograph: Liam James.



IMAGE > Portrait of Kate Just with *Self Care Action Series*, 2022. Image courtesy of the artist.

KATE JUST

Kate Just is an American born, Australian feminist artist best known for her inventive and political use of knitting. Through the deployment of traditional craft forms, such as knitting and sewing, Just questions histories of female and queer representation through the lens of subjective experience. Always autobiographical, her solo work and socially en-gaged collaborative projects explore ideas of feminist conceptions of the body, memories of gender and family, and the power of craft to elicit social change.

<https://www.katejust.com/>

LIST OF WORKS

Kate Just
Conversation Piece
on going
wool
dimensions variable

Kate Just
Self Care Action Series
2023
hand knitted acrylic yarn,
canvas, timber
40 panels
55 x 40cm



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THIS WEEK IN ST KILDA



SEARLE & WALDRON ARCHITECTURE

