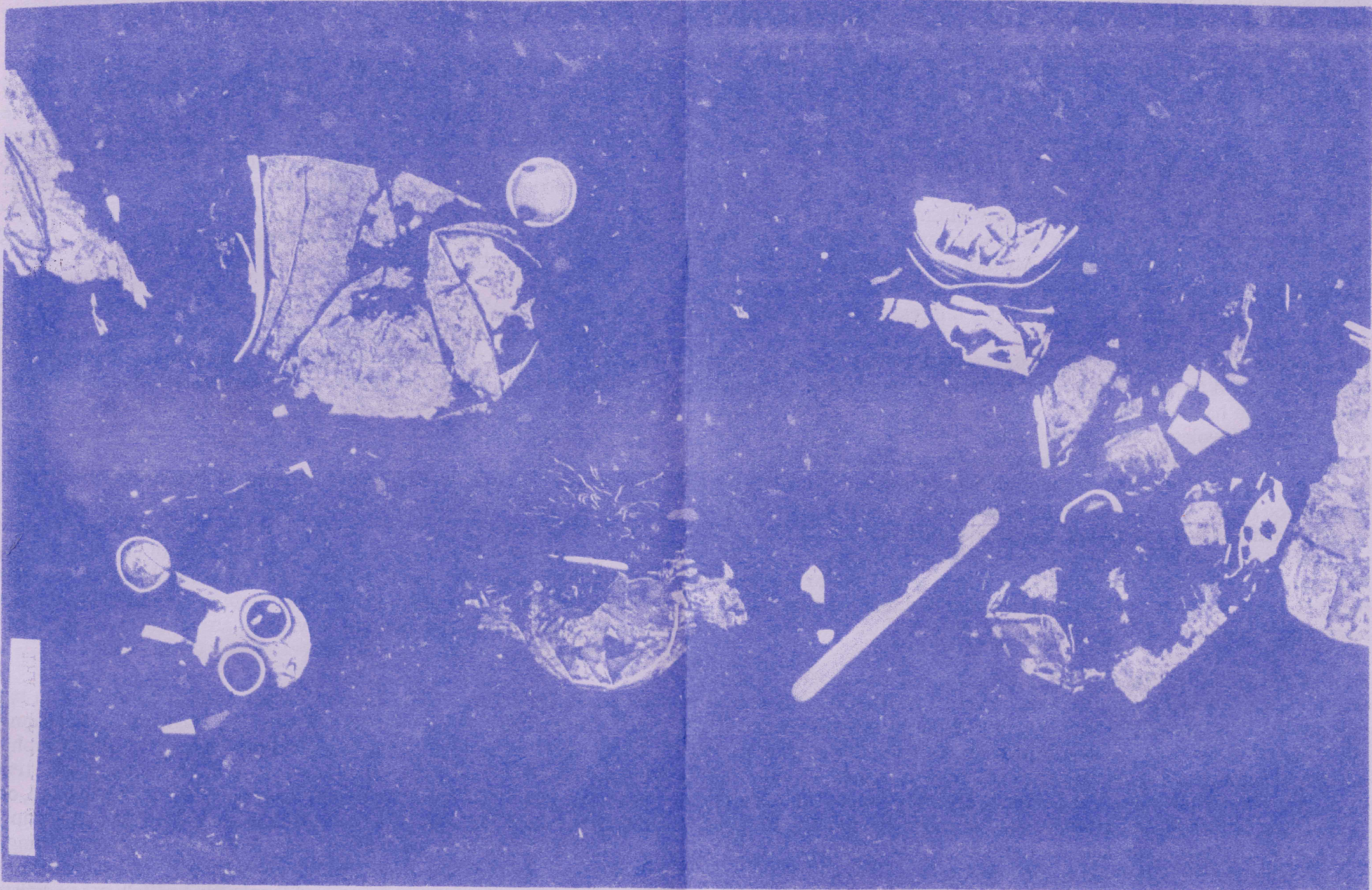


The folder name, “Involuntary Art,” stops me. I am trying to find photographs to write about today — I want to write about the specific quality of an image and not just use the featured image as an illustration. The other images in this folder are of peeling poster collages and polished concretions. Who chose the title for this folder? After visiting the NYPL Picture Collection again last month, I am yearning for more information. I want to know more. It felt exciting to work with a living, expanding collection, instead of this one; sometimes, spending time among the dusty filing cabinets is isolating.

There isn't a lot of information about “involuntary art” online: a lecture from a landscape designer, a book called *Involuntary Sculptures*, some images from Reddit. Perhaps the archivist meant something else. The word *involuntary* itself has negative connotations: actions not made by choice, done without control. Instead my mind goes to photography and to accident.

The image (fig. 1) looks like trash scattered on the street, the asphalt that dark blue black, littered with a disintegrating soda can, a popsicle stick, what looks like an alien face. Jason Nocito's PUD books come to mind; they feature crisp, saturated photographs of puddles in New York City. The scale of these pictures tickles me — 8x10 photographs render the world to a degree that is nearly unbelievable. The puddles garner a new sense of depth this way. They are all colors of the rainbow, but especially the sickly fluorescent green of antifreeze.

Moyra Davey's essay “Notes on Photography and Accident,” from her 2008 book *Long Life Cool White*, published by Harvard Art Museums, brings together writing about the accidental nature of photography. I'm surprised to find, rereading it ten years after an image and text class in college, that Davey wrote the essay while ill: “In the hospital, on steroids, I have the feeling for the first time in my life that I can simply ‘be.’ I no longer have to push myself to do anything, to prove anything.” I feel the same way I did when I first walked through MCASD's exhibition, *For Dear Life: Art, Medicine, and Disability*, last fall: other artists are sick. Other artists have been sick, and have written about it. Slightly less shame, a clearing away of something.



100-100-100-100

fig. 1

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Davey writes about writer's block and its lack of an equal when it comes to other artistic merits: "with this symbolic deficiency comes a shame implying a failure of the will, lassitude, impotence." I feel shame over my lack of artistic output over the past few years. The shame is particularly acute this month because the illness is acting up. In the fall, I read Margaret Iversen's *Photography, Trace, and Trauma* (University of Chicago Press, 2015) around the same time that I began EMDR therapy. I don't remember anything about the book, except that it sat on the coffee table for nearly a year before I read it. *I don't feel ready*, I kept saying, and so my partner kept extending the inter-library loan. The cover was dark blue. I cannot remember now what was part of the book or what was part of the initial bit of therapy. My mother was afraid I was being hypnotized; my sister-in-law said it was radical. I was mostly worried that I would lose access to memories that felt integral to art-making.

The opposite has happened over the past few months: I no longer feel quite so inclined to write about myself in order to validate, in some way, what has happened to me. I want to write about other things, about books. (Invoking the word trauma in relation to oneself invites trepidation. Trauma eclipses all else narratively. During a podcast appearance, Lucy Ives describes trauma as "experience that can never be fully relived nor fully overcome, experience that we can't fully have and which we can't fully cease having." She notes that it is trauma's ubiquity we must learn to navigate.) EMDR therapy is strange, and does feel a bit like hypnosis; it also feels like someone is taking sandpaper to the sharp parts. Each week I am surprised to return and find that the sharp parts have grown dimmer.

Photography is "something directly stenciled off the real" (Sontag). Iversen: "Just as photography, to some extent, bypasses artistic intention and convention, so also the traumatic event bypasses consciousness. Both involve an indelible impression of something generated outside." I began making photographs when I was fifteen, around the same time I began having sex, and often in the same place. The sex was involuntary, in public, and often in view of other people. The images were not involuntary: I was alone in them, often avoiding the eye of the camera. The pictures belonged to me directly.