INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS

AUTUMN KNIGHT

29 September – 29 November 2026

Introduction

I Can't Complain is an exercise in indulging complaint. In her first UK exhibition, Autumn Knight considers how complaint reveals negotiations of power in everyday life through works spanning sound, installation, video and performance. Rather than dismissing complaint as a nuisance, she takes seriously the act of complaining: its pleasures, its frustrations, and its political potential.

Knight is a New York-based interdisciplinary artist whose practice is rooted in live performance. Drawing on her background in theatre and psychology, she uses humour and absurdity to challenge familiar conventions around race, gender, and authority. In this new commission for the ICA, Knight extends her performance practice into a durational and spatial gallery installation.

An audio installation fills the main gallery. Knight invited participants to complain about their everyday dissatisfactions and disappointments, compiling a selection that alights on those irritants that expose larger social and systemic failings. The participants come from a broad range of places, cultures, ages, and backgrounds, yet their complaints are strikingly universal: the mundane frustrations of food quality, the minefield of family relationships, the volatility of public transport encounters.

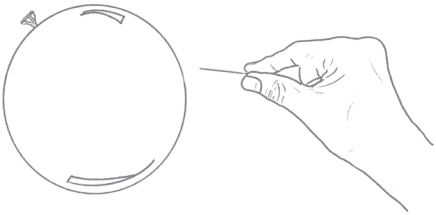
The common refrain is to 'think positive', 'look on the bright side', or 'stop being so sensitive', but the voices we hear aren't judged as killjoys or whiners. Knight takes an active interest in people's relationship to expressing discontent and asks the viewer to do the same. Considering complaint in this way also prompts the questions: who has the right to complain? What value judgements are being made when we classify something as complaint? When can you speak up, and where is complaint welcomed or dismissed?

The elements in the exhibition are arranged to create a space for reflection. A large net suspended from the gallery ceiling captures an array of black balloons, below which a long lightbox casts gradient light that shifts from warm to cool. Balloons, which may deflate or pop during the course of the exhibition, carry the possibility of disappointment. An animation looping at the gallery entrance depicts that deflating moment.

Balloons and lightboxes are recurring devices in Knight's work, and both are central to the live performance component of the exhibition. Through text, improvisation, spoken and physical performance, Knight and her collaborators Samra Mayanja, Michelangelo Miccolis and nick von kleist transform the gallery for five distinct performances into the setting for a party of one, a party pooper (in two versions), a party done, and a final celebratory pity party.

Knight has been interrogating the different valences of complaint in her artistic practice for the past few years. The back gallery serves as a screening room for two recent projects that consider who has the right to complain. *Complain/Disappoint* (2023), a performance made in collaboration with university students and educators, explores institutional labour and the burden of workers. *Untitled (Complain)* (2023) comprises video workshops in which German actors rehearse quotidian personal and public complaint.

The exhibition as a whole embraces humour, discomfort and intimacy to disrupt the taboo against voicing objection. *I Can't Complain* asks not how we can stop complaining but what complaints might make visible.



Autumn Knight, *I Can't Complain*, 2026
Site-specific installation comprising a cargo net, foil and latex balloons, ropes, pulleys, cleats, hardwood benches and custom lightbox.

Two-channel audio, approx. 25 min. (looped), featuring interviews with Samra Mayanja, Michelangelo Miccolis, Nicole Smythe-Johnson, Garima Thakur, and Wang Hong-Kai, with sampled music and field recordings. Sound editing and design by Levy Lorenzo.

This newly commissioned installation and audio work considers complaint. A large cargo net is suspended along the length of the gallery, capturing an array of black balloons. Ropes and pulleys allow the net to be lowered and raised for the exhibition's performances. The balloons, a recurring motif in Knight's work, may deflate or pop; during some performances, some of them will. The artist's practice often incorporates unexpected events and contradictions to destabilise habitual responses in audiences and performers. The balloons function similarly: their buoyancy is offset by their apparent heaviness in the bulging net, while their association with celebration is undercut by their sombre colour. Balloons are inherently temporary, vulnerable both to the slow escape of air and to sudden contact with a sharp edge. Their impermanence brings a performative dimension to the installation and makes the possibility of disappointment physically present.

A large lightbox glows beneath the net, its shifting light moving between warm and cool tones. Lightboxes entered Knight's work during the COVID-19 pandemic, when her performance practice pivoted toward the camera and the screen. In those works, the lightbox served as a compact performance space focusing

attention on gesture, colour, voice, and objects that appear familiar or out of place. Here, the form is enlarged and installed in the gallery as a platform for live performance.

Complaint is primarily a vocal act, and Knight amplifies a succession of dissatisfied voices through an immersive audio installation that weaves spoken interviews together with music and field recordings. The work grew out of conversations with participants from a wide range of places and cultural backgrounds, and with varied life experiences, whom Knight first invited to complain about the pettiest or most trivial irritation that came to mind. Like much of the artist's practice, the conversations began as a proposition. There was no predetermined outcome. Instead, she approached these interviews as an open-ended investigation, following uncomfortable or unresolved moments as they emerged and asking participants to elaborate when a gripe began to touch on something larger. Trivial disappointments about food quality, difficult family dynamics, or offensive encounters on public transport can open onto broader questions of inequality shaped by culture, gender, and class.

The interviews focus less on the reasons for a complaint than on the act of complaining itself: the cathartic relief of voicing something long held, and the sense of connection that comes when a frustration is heard, recognised, and shared by others. Despite the broad range of participants, their concerns are familiar; their everyday irritations rankle many of us, too. A private grievance, once voiced and shared, can become collective. Knight layers the voices with music and field recordings, including city sounds and advertising, a 1977 recording by the Japanese taiko drumming ensemble Za Ondekoza, and Rev. Paul Jones's gospel recording of 'I Won't Complain' (1993). These sounds introduce a sense of shared experience around the individual voices. Together, they move between the intimate and the communal, allowing seemingly minor frustrations to touch on the broader social structures, injustices and inherited norms. A single complaint can function like a splinter, a small irritation that gets under the skin, the visible point of a much deeper issue, one more difficult to extricate.

While Knight's practice often addresses institutional barriers, this work is less concerned with the formal complaint lodged within an institution, than how quickly

a person voicing opposition encounters institutional resistance. The exhibition offers a retort to its own self-minimising title. 'I can't complain' suggests that a problem is not serious enough to warrant mention, or that one has no right to make an issue of it. The work responds: but what if you could? Knight creates a space in which grievances can be voiced, heard, and recognised, allowing us to see both what we share in these everyday frustrations and some of the social, political, and institutional barriers that can make them difficult to voice. In giving space and attention to what might otherwise be dismissed, the exhibition invites us to consider what becomes possible when we articulate what we are accustom to minimising.

Back Gallery

Autumn Knight, compilation video of excerpts from *Complain/Disappoint* (2023) and *Untitled (Complain)* (2023), single-channel video, colour, sound, 2 hr 16 min, intercut approx. every 10 min.

***Complain/Disappoint*, 2023, single-channel video, colour, sound.**
Video work documenting a performance at the Neuberger Museum of Art at SUNY Purchase, State University of New York, 12–16 April 2023.

Performed by Autumn Knight with Kayla Barton, Dre Franco, Bunni3 Gilot, Eliel Pacheco, and Brianna Thompson. Video director: Ross Karre; camera improvisors: Merve Kayan and Monica Duncan; sound design: Senem Pirler; animation: Valerie Caesar; sculptures created by Powerhouse Arts; cellist: Dr Earnest Lamb; with Robin Lynch, Shaka McGlotten, and Lachell Workman.

***Untitled (Complain)*, 2023, single-channel video, colour, sound.**
Featuring Raphael Westermeier, Adi Hrustemović, Sarah Quarshie, Linda Elsner, Alexander Darkow and Valentina Schüler. Camera: Mirella Drosten and Stefan Teubner; colour grading: Mirella Drosten; editing: Isabel Frye.

Alongside the new commission in the main gallery, the back gallery serves as a screening room for two projects from 2023 that consider who has the right to complain. *Complain/Disappoint* documents a sculptural installation and dialogue-based performance work presented at the Neuberger Museum of Art, SUNY Purchase College. The performers were given the prompt to complain and to interact with the sculptural objects in Knight's installation. Performers recited a selection of texts by people who 'are not usually allowed to complain or who we do not expect to hear complaining'. This earlier work specifically explores labour, vulnerability and the relationship between workers' criticisms and burdens. The project was collaborative: those heard and seen in the video are students, staff, faculty, administrators, and members of the college's leadership, representing a range of positions within the institution and its culture.

Interwoven into the video documentation of *Complain/ Disappoint* are short excerpts from *Untitled (Complain),* 2023. The latter comprises a series of character and object studies of personal grievances. Actors from the ensemble at Schauspiel Dortmund, Germany, collaborated with Knight to create an experimental sequence of text and movement in response to a simple prompt: to complain. Each actor was paired with an object or another actor and prepared a related story of annoyance or disappointment. The resulting monologues were filmed alongside movement improvised for the camera. Together, the stories become a rehearsal of individual disappointment and an enquiry into which complaints are considered valid, whether personal, political, or apparently trivial.

Autumn Knight, *I Can't Complain: Performances* (*party of one; party pooper 1, party pooper 2, party done,* and *pity party*), 2026.
Site-specific live performance programme.

A series of five performances forms an integral part of the exhibition. The artist and her collaborators explore the nuances and pleasures of complaint across three solo performances by Knight, a solo by Samra Mayanja in response to the exhibition, and a live event developed by Knight in collaboration with the performers Michelangelo Miccolis and nick von kleist.

The performances build upon Knight's longstanding live practice, in which absurdity, humour, and confrontation become tools for challenging assumptions about authority and social dynamics. Drawing on her background in drama therapy, psychology and group relations, the artist responds to the particular conditions of each encounter, shifting course in the moment. Knight's use of performance to interrogate group dynamics, institutional space, and audience expectations places her work in dialogue with artists such as Adrian Piper, Pope.L, and Lorraine O'Grady. Their practices similarly employ humour, satire, confrontation and staged encounters to expose social and institutional conventions. Here, she turns those strategies towards complaint: its joys and frustrations, its capacity to foster empathy and create space for vulnerability, and its potential to bring everyday injustice into view.

For the first performance, *party of one,* Knight commands the room, transforming the exhibition space into a live stage. She uses her presence, movement, and voice alongside the elements of the exhibition, including the gallery-length lightbox and balloons. In this lecture-performance the artist recites a text developed in tandem with, and in response to, the other works in the exhibition.

In *party pooper*, presented in two versions, Knight forgoes the scripted text and responds instead to the exhibition, the immediate environment, and the unfolding dynamics of the performance. Voice and movement become her primary tools as she attends to the ways a complaint can move through a group: how it is shared, amplified, redirected, or resisted.

In *party done,* London-based artist Samra Mayanja stages the aftermath of a party that may have just ended or may never have begun. The cargo net full of balloons is lowered; some balloons have escaped and lie strewn about the floor. Moving along the lightbox, Mayanja may pop some of them using an assortment of sharp implements. Mayanja (who also contributed to the exhibition's audio installation) brings her own stories of complaint into the gallery, rehearsing and reworking them in response to the space and its contents.

For the final performance in the series, *pity party,* Michelangelo Miccolis and nick von kleist host a blowout party within the gallery, complete with a DJ, drinks, and an invitation to catch up and air grievances. Moving between hospitality and performance, the hosts slip in and out of character as they engage with the audience. A live video feed captures the physical manifestations of complaint in close-up and relays the footage into the back gallery.

About the artist

Autumn Knight is a New York-based interdisciplinary artist who works with performance, installation, video, and text. Drawing on her training in theatre and the psychology of group dynamics, Knight makes performances that reshape perceptions of race, gender, and authority.

Knight's performance work has been presented in museums, galleries, and performance venues including Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2025); Shedhalle, Zürich (2025); Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA), Portland (2024, 2018); Performance Space New York (2023); Museum Ostwall, Dortmund (2023); MCA Chicago (2022); Western Front, Vancouver (2021); The Kitchen, New York (2020); Performa, New York (2019); the Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2019); Akademie der Künste, Berlin (2018); and The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2017), among others. Knight's work *WALL* (2014–16) was the first live performance work acquired for the permanent collection of The Studio Museum in Harlem.

Knight's solo exhibitions include *Nothing #26: The Potential of Nothing Is Everything* at Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, New York (2023), and *In Rehearsal* at Krannert Art Museum, Champaign, Illinois (2017).

Knight is the recipient of awards, grants, and fellowships, including the Houston Artadia Award, Art Matters Grant, Rema Hort Mann Foundation Grant, Anonymous Was A Woman Award, Foundation for Contemporary Arts Grant, Nancy B. Negley Rome Prize in Visual Art, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. In 2024, she received a Trellis Art Fund Milestone Grant. She attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture (2016) and holds a BA in Theater Arts from Dillard University and an MA in Drama Therapy from New York University.

Related Events

Artist's Film Picks:
No Other Choice, 2025, dir. Park Chan-wook
Wed 21 Oct, 6:30pm

Artist's Film Picks:
I Am Not Your Negro, 2016, dir. Raoul Peck
Wed 28 Oct, 6:30pm

ICA Members Tour with curator Andrea Nitsche-Krupp
Tue 3 Nov, 6:30pm

Lecture:
Sara Ahmed on Complaining, again
Tue 10 Nov, 6:45pm

Artist's Film Picks:
Persepolis, 2007, dir. Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud
Wed 11 Nov, 6:30pm

For further information or to book tickets, please visit ica.art.

Cover drawing:
Autumn Knight, *Drawing (Untitled),* 2021. Courtesy of the Artist.

Doodles:
Autumn Knight, video stills from *Complain/Disappoint,* 2023, animation by Valerie Caesar.

Performance Schedule

The exhibition includes a series of five performances exploring the nuances and pleasures of complaint. All performances will take place in the gallery.

party of one
Performed by Autumn Knight, with an introduction to the artist's practice by Knight and curator Andrea Nitsche-Krupp.
Thu 1 Oct, 7pm

party pooper 1
Performed by Autumn Knight
Mon 12 Oct, 7pm

party pooper 2
Performed by Autumn Knight
Thu 15 Oct, 7pm

party done
Performed by Samra Mayanja
Fri 6 Nov, 6:30pm

pity party
Final party and performance by Michelangelo Miccolis and nick von kleist
Fri 20 Nov, 7 – 10pm

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