

Creative Access: A Pedagogy for Arts Leaders

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“Access is treated not as an afterthought but as a creative process intrinsic both to art practice and curatorial practice.”—Kristin Lindgren and Debora Sherman¹

Introduction

In this article, I argue that creative access is an important methodology that must be embraced by arts leaders to make our museums and cultural spaces more equitable and disability-centric. In the past decade, creative access has flourished as a methodology because contemporary disabled artists have been drawn to deploying access in their work for both its aesthetic and political qualities. Artists use access as a medium for their artwork and activist projects, namely incorporating the materiality of captions, alt-text, image descriptions, and tactile properties, where access functions aesthetically. This work simultaneously offers practical solutions to how access can be made visible and utilitarian within the artist’s own life, certainly, but I argue, within larger art and museum culture too. Arts leaders must learn and adapt from this work, where disabled artists should not only be represented in both permanent and temporary exhibitions, but they can also be hired as consultants and advisors regarding museum policy, curatorial and exhibition design, conservation and lending policies, and more. Indeed, the very purposeful inclusion of access in work by contemporary disabled artists is anything but surreptitious. Forcing visitors to focus on access through the contemporary artwork of disabled artists also centers it, and shows how it is actually missing, for the most part, when we engage with the curatorship and exhibition design of our arts and cultural spaces. Creative access must be embraced by galleries and museums as a sustained means to engage with disabled artists, disabled audiences, and the general public writ large because creative access is a methodology that indicates prioritizing the needs of disabled users. Creative access works as a way to thoroughly activate museum workers, artists, and audiences with disability, as disability will become foremost in our thinking as we design, develop and execute programs and events, instead of being an afterthought. This essay will provide in-depth detail on how creative access has been utilized and deployed in a number of exhibition case studies drawn from the past decade.²

The term “creative access” has been used interchangeably with other terms, such as “access-as-praxis” and “access aesthetics.” Even though these terms have a slightly different meaning, where a focus might be more on “aesthetics” rather than “politics” depending on the reference, they all point to how access can be used in more delightfully creative ways rather than as something that is to be approached with a checklist in mind. Contemporary disabled artists have certainly taken up the mantle to conceive of access in aesthetically pleasing and politicized forms, but the point of this essay is to emphasize that arts leaders must do the same. The notion of an aesthetics of access was first coined by Deaf theater director Jenny Sealey in the late 1990’s.³ Sealey is the CEO and Artistic Director of Graeae Theatre Company which is a disability-led theatre company based in the UK. Sealey sought to incorporate audio description and sign language interpretation into the overall dramatic language of theatrical productions, and her innovation has now trickled across numerous platforms, including the visual arts, music, dance, and writing. The main point I wish to make here, however, is that it was an arts leader

within an arts organization who developed the genesis for this methodology, where there was a recognition that the so-called neutrality and compliant nature of access had to be re-thought so that access could be centered instead of being regularly neglected.

In the case studies to follow, an examination of a series of exhibitions curated by the author of this essay show how creative access has both material and ideological components that are meant to stimulate physical, cognitive and sensorial functions of the human body. The essay has been divided up into several major categories which correspond to the ephemera of access, namely audio and image descriptions, haptic activism, and movement. The case studies will attempt to show what creative access has been and what the possibilities have been so far within one curator's experiences and observations. Museums are largely missing out on creative access, and this essay makes this reality vivid.

The academic field of disability studies has offered outstanding scholars in the arts who have engaged with access as a key aspect of art and performance in curation and in staging representational work in the 1980s and 1990s. These scholars include Carrie Sandahl, Petra Kuppers, Simi Linton, and Sins Invalid.⁴ It is also notable that these scholars established or contributed to many of the access practices that we are familiar with now, such as the concept of relaxed performance, which is where the ambience and the rules of a typical theatrical performance are "relaxed" to benefit those with learning or sensory disabilities, such as autism.⁵ The work of the Bay Area-based disability justice performance project Sins Invalid, which Patty Berne co-founded in 2006, centered early conceptions of multi-sensory and accessible performance by virtue of the knowledges that the disabled performers brought to the stage, along with how the tenets of disability justice and politics could literally and most powerfully be brought to life. These scholars are the significant precursors to access aesthetics.

Creative access extends from the generally understood meaning of "access," which is the ability to approach and use something. The exhibitions discussed in the upcoming paragraphs demonstrate how the author's curatorial work is a hybrid practice given the emphasis on creative access. The author's curatorial practice sits in a space between traditional curatorship, pedagogy, and exhibition design, owing to an interest in the conceptual and intellectual challenges that stem from considering the audience's needs through the aesthetics of access and accommodation. In the case studies provided, the reader will learn how the experiments in installation of artworks, audience participation and tactile engagement all contribute towards exploratory exhibition design with a focus on the needs of a greater diversity of visitors in tandem with translating phenomenological embodiments of disability. One of the ultimate goals and outcomes of this work in exhibition design is demonstrating how the disabled body expands the sensory regime. Creative access involves constant problem-solving, and it has been useful to evaluate both the successes and failures and the politics, and to share this with others. It is important that we continue to share the outcomes of our curatorial work in the methodology of creative access in the future, and eventually creative access and the experiences to stem from the disabled sensorium will become institutionalized and ingrained into the policies and practices of the arts management sector.

Audio Description and Captions

In this section, the reader will learn how audio description has been used in the author's curatorial practice to give the reader an institutional perspective on how this can be done outside of artists engaging in access as praxis. Audio description is a narration of the visual (and other sensorial) elements of a visual image for the benefit of blind and low-vision individuals.

Scholarship on the role of audio description is still in a nascent stage, but Georgina Kleege is one of the key scholars who is prolifically writing about the intersection of audio description and visual art.⁶ The process of developing audio descriptions for exhibitions in collaborations with artists, students, and audiences has expanded ideas of what audio description can or should be. While industry templates or models exist for “good” audio description, audio description can become a collective process, with crowd sourcing, exchange, networking and multi-sensorial narratives commingling to produce a more participatory effect. To this end, in, for example, *What Can a Body Do?* (2012), *Sweet Gongs Vibrating* (2013), and *Script/Rescript* (2022), the author invited artists, students and other stakeholders involved to develop audio descriptions of the work. The students used a free online voice recorder (www.vocaroo.com) to create flexible MP3 files of their descriptions. Audio descriptions can be independent works of art in themselves, carrying their own weight and space and serving as extensions of the artists’ work, with each party to the process increasing awareness of thinking critically about a fuller spectrum of audiences and how they might access their art beyond the ocular. This is especially true for artists who might identify with a particular disability, but who neglect to think beyond the implications and challenges of their own embodiment. One might mistakenly assume that artists with disabilities form one large, homogenized and unified group, but as with any other minority groups, silos and divisions occur within various disabilities too. Recording audio description also might offer the artist, student and curator a richer and more complex means of thinking about their artmaking process, adding new dialogical layers to a work that is predominantly visual or aural. The author always invited artists to be a part of the audio description process to titillate their thinking towards access and how it might form a productive dialogue with their art-making process, now and in the future. In some instances, some of the artists commented that they had never thought about audio description for their work before, and so they found the process interesting and useful.

What Can a Body Do? was an exhibition featuring the work of nine contemporary artists who invented and reframed disability across various media. The exhibition was held at Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery at Haverford College in the fall of 2012. Apart from inviting the artists to work on the audio descriptions for the objects in the exhibition, the gallery's student staff and exhibition interns, led by Aubree Penney and Michael Rushmore, also wrote and recorded audio descriptions of each piece. Of this experience, Professor Kristin Lindgren said that, “Most students brought to this task a strong interest in visual art but no previous engagement with disability studies. Indeed, some were skeptical that an exhibition focused on disability would be aesthetically and conceptually compelling. Producing an audio description, however, enabled each student to engage intimately with the work of one of the artists and to envision its place in the exhibition.”⁷ Naturally, then, incorporating the voices of the curator, the artists and the students as part of this audio description exercise really meant that the audio description, and consequently the exhibit website, began to function akin to the nature of a television, where various channels will instantaneously give you access to a multiplicity of styles, techniques, opinions and sensibilities. Similarly, the website and the various audio tracks and written audio transcriptions give the museum visitor to *What Can a Body Do?* a plethora of means in which to engage with the work, through various perspectives.

In some cases, the visitor had the opportunity to hear up to two different descriptions of the same work, one by the artist and another by a student. The following example offers a description of *Carried & Held* (2012) (Figure 1) by, first, Park McArthur (the artist of the work), and second, an excerpt of the description by student Alicja Kielczewska:

Audio description #1 by Park McArthur:

...*Carried and Held* follows the format of a museum wall label. The entire board, which hangs flush to the gallery wall, is long and narrow, 8 inches wide by 38 inches long, with more than a quarter of the bottom half of the board left blank. The rest of the board is covered in text. The title, *Carried and Held*, is listed before the date of completion, 2012, and above the list of materials, museum board, oil, lipstick, highlighter. Under this detailed list flows lists of names of people who have carried or held the artist's body. The long list includes specific names such as John McArthur, the artist's father, but also lists descriptions of people the artist never knew or can no longer remember...Bradford's friend from Norway, the boat caption at Fire Island, for example. Interrupting the middle of the block of text are free-floating emoticons, both the punctuation marks that create emoticons and the faces these punctuation marks construct through translation. These emoticons range from smiley faces to frowny faces, to devils, to hearts, with additional punctuation marks and symbols, just ampersands around the floating faces. The emoticons spacing and format break away from the orderly sequence of listed names. The emoticons range in size, many of them are highly pixelated, and all are printed in various shades of grey. At the top of the museum board's very thin right edge, about a sixteenth of an inch, is a smudge of dark pink lipstick blended into a dash of yellow highlighter. These two materials overlap briefly, creating an orange hue.

Audio description #2 by Alicja Kielczewska:

Park McArthur's *Carried and Held* is a piece on museum board consisting of text and symbol graphics. The board, eight inches by 36 inches in size, has about an inch of margin at the top and the left, with a wider margin at the right. At the very top, the title of the piece is written in boldface and in smaller text, there is a brief list of the materials used, museum board, oil, lipstick, and highlighter. Underneath that, in large letters, appears a list of all the people who have carried and held McArthur throughout her life. The names are not listed alphabetically. On the list, there are many people with the surname McArthur and Herman. The board features both names and informal titles, for example, unknown Taiwanese business-man, Nicole Mader's semi-new boyfriend, all the young men who felt obligated but unsure in volunteering, and middle-school history teacher David somebody. In the center of the board, layered underneath the text, there is a small faded smiley face of an unclear facial expression. To the right of it are three emoticons: one is a colon, dash and slash, the middle one is a colon and a back-slash. The last one on the right is a colon, dash, and a back-slash. In the same section there are three meandering columns of smiley faces of varying expressions, printed in bold face over the text. The faces get smaller from the top of each column to the bottom. There are smiley faces with a variety of expressions, and smiley faces with glasses, halos and devil horns...Underneath the frowny faces, there are icons in the following order: a person, a robot, a heart, a shark, the number forty-two, and a penguin.

Clearly these descriptions are quite different, although there is also some overlap. The main observation is that, compared to the first description, the second one offers much more detail on

the nature of the emoticons and the punctuation symbols. The second also provides different examples of the names of the people who carried and held McArthur, many of which are quite amusing. Either way, it is enriching to provide many styles and types of descriptions for the user. Non-visual learner and artist Carmen Papalia said that he enjoys hearing different descriptions, because it is much like hearing a new personality and a new perspective, or like flipping channels on Netflix that give the user more options.

Carried & Held 2012

Museum board, lipstick, oil, highlighter

Courtesy the artist and Margaret Herman, Alexandra McArthur
John McArthur, Walker Herman, Mary Herman, Gayle McArthur
Rob Wilusz, Mary Doster Whitaker, Bill and Judy Whitaker
Clarence McArthur, Betty McArthur, Ann Gayle Rankin
Tom Herman, Emily Herman, Cheryl Simon, Clem Herman
Johanna Herman, Cesar Maldonado, Emery Herman Jr, Nancy Herman
Amy Mathys, Peter Freehafer, Verde Barringer, Rosie Molinary
Betsy Kelleher, Dr. Shen, Emily Mangone, Sally Olvos, Jenny Olvos
Christine Byun, Gal Nyska, Catherine Walker, Jeremy Freifeld
Jane Dalton, Duna Norton, Meredith Steele, Janine Hoffmann
Jesse Sharp-Williams, Amanda Matles, Laurie Dunn, Laura Case
Crawford Crenshaw, L.C., Bob Giduz, Mona, Loretta Shala
Nancy McMillan, Melissa Berry, Bob Lees, Bonnie Wright
Kathleen Cour, Laura Gerhardt, Stanley In China, Angie Wright
Jim McArthur, Ming an Lee, Murphy, Jeffie Chang, Lauren Lopez
Henry Weil, Middleton Chang, Pete, Unknown Taiwanese Businessman
Melissa Bandy, Derek Lundberg, Wendy McArthur, Leigh
Bradford McArthur, Chip Schantz, Brent McCormick, David Prince
Ben Fain, Cybele Lyle, Darren Price, Madelyn Mayer, Owen Fitzpatrick
Becca Fitzpatrick, Audrey Hynes, Tom McArthur, Kathleen Hudspeth
Carle Saxton, Adler Guentler, David Saxton, Willy Hoffmann
Tara Thananetaporn, U Lu, Laura Schuenborg, Becky Nolin, Jen Pike
Michael Just, Jessica Sanders, Kavin Tedamrongwanish, Bethany Pelle
Hannah Heckner, Nicole Mader, Nicole Mader's semi-new boyfriend
Ann Rath, Fred Rath, W Mae Singerman, all the young men who
felt obligated but unsure in volunteering, Loretta Fahrenholz, her dad
Bill Rath, David Rath, Inka Mellner, Tyler Bonnen, Tori Cole, Rebecca Wood
Maxwell Graham, Tom Ackers, Trista Mallory, Michelle Levin, Jason Loeb
Teresa Smith, Tina Zavitsanos, Amalie Dublin, s.o. o'brien, Sky Hall
Yve Laris Cohen, middle school history teacher David somebody,
Kristina Bramwell, Krista Heiner, David Crane, Joe Madura, Nate Harrison
Allan Chang, Kwan Bigelow, Benedicte Henschien, Lisa Fulenwider
Branwyn Charlton
Brooks Fish, Jessica Rodriguez
Sarah Cantrell, Rachel Heckner
... and proper for a puppet show [electronic resource];...
Catalogues may be had gratis of Messrs. D-----y, and W-----t
...putnam:
Daisy Figueroa
& Jeremiah Beaverly, Betsy Kelleher
Henry Van Wagenberg
Stephanie Culhane
Anna Lineback, Billie Lynn, Crystal Campbell, Dana Schrenk
Carey McArthur, Jeannine Tang, the guy from Chinese class at
Chiuhung's apartment in Miami, Diana Valbuena, Emily Case
Bryn, Greta in Cooperstown, Hadley Smith, Oscar Tillman, Padraig
O'Donoghue, Kari Jiang, Kendal Patterson, Lucy Marcell, Mitch Blessing
Kurt from Hudson Mobillity, Bradford's friend from Norway, Akemi Nishida
Kristy Hayden, All the airline staff, attendants and occasional captain
Ben Tiven, Peter Daniel, Tim Saltarelli, Pam and Gary Shinn
Kim McArthur, Jim, Sandy McArthur, Cindy McArthur, Cassie McArthur
Terry and Dan, Whitney's parents Alice Garland and Rodney Swink
the midwife, Mary Lou of the sandwich shop, Denise Natch
Apex Middle School Janitor, Susie Frasier, Peter Freehafer
Lisa Freehafer, Cherry Grove Fire Island boat captain, Ashley Griffith
Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen, 2 people in UM across the apartment
Cyrus Atkins, David Johnson, Nigel Wallace, Boots and Bill

Figure 1: Park, McArthur, *Carried & Held*, 2012

In addition to the enlightening nature of having multivalent descriptions for a single object in an exhibition, McArthur's *Carried and Held* is also one of the earliest examples where creative access is being deployed directly in an art object as well. McArthur is using the convention of a museum label for the artwork itself, refashioning it for her purposes so that it

documents a history of her embodiment as it has engaged with other bodies. Figure 1 shows McArthur's version of a label whilst the standard label is hung alongside it. The appearance of McArthur's label starts off the way it would in a conventional label, with the tombstone information of the title, date and materials, but what follows deviates from the norm, as the list of names unfolds, interspersed by the emoticons and punctuation marks. While McArthur's label is not necessarily institutional critique at this point, she none the less injects a very direct and real disability narrative into the museum label, providing a window into the day-to-day realities of a wheelchair user that most people would never think of.

In 2016, the author curated *Sweet Gongs Vibrating* for San Diego Art Institute. This was a multisensory exhibition that aimed to break with ocular-centrism by embracing myriad modes of perception. This project aspired to activate the multi-sensorial qualities of objects to seek alternative narratives regarding access, place, and space for the benefit of a more diverse audience, particularly for people with blindness and low vision. This exhibition is discussed in more detail in the next section for its incorporation of tactile components, but in this section is a brief mention of how creative access of audio descriptions was pushed even further than previous projects curated by the author up until this point, because the curator asked the participating artists to not only describe the visual aspects of the image, but also, in instances where it was relevant, to describe the sounds. One memorable example was of an installation by Wendy Jacob, entitled *Three threads an a thrum (for D.B.)*, 2016, which was a very personal response to a friend's death. This was a piece where a visitor could feel the vibrations of a cat purring if one was to place their hands on the wall at the entrance to the exhibition (see Figure 2). Jacob did a wonderful job of describing the sound from this experience, using it a poetic exercise in tactility and language expression (see Figure 3):

A cat purrs at a frequency of 20-30 Hz. The threshold of human audition is 20 Hz, so the cat's purring hovers just above what we can hear with our ears. The human tactile range, however, is lower, starting at 5 Hz. At 20 Hz it is hard to know if you are feeling or hearing sound, so I would say the sensation is the same. In terms of describing the sound itself, I will refer you to an (old) Scots language expression describing a cat purring. "Three threads in a thrum, three threads in a thrum..."

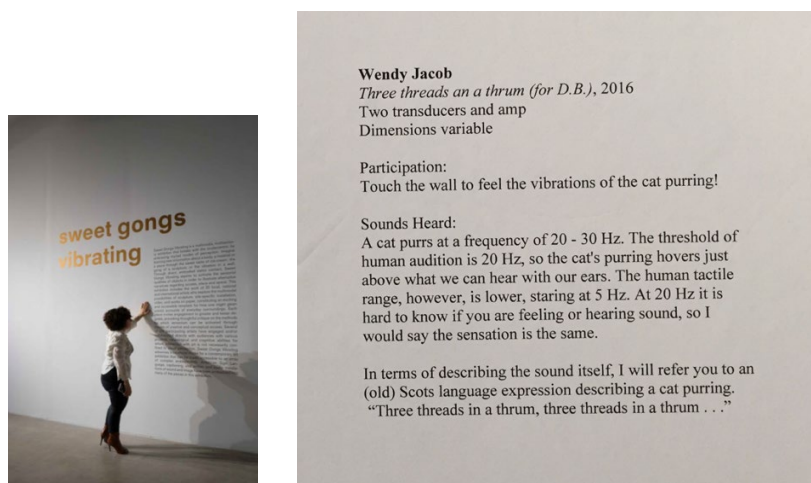


Figure 2-3: (left), Amanda Cachia engaging with Wendy Jacob, *Three threads and a thrum (for D.B.)*, 2016, two transducers and amp in *Sweet Gongs Vibrating*;

(right) detail of Wendy Jacob's label that describes the sound from her installation

In the case of the collaborative work by Brian Goeltzenleuchter and Anna van Suchtelen, *Let's call it grass*, 2015, which consisted of a poem, an offset print, and an artist-made fragrance, the artists pointed out to me that the fragrance of grass should also be described given that some visitors in attendance may have a reduced sense of smell, or even anosmia, which is more commonly known as smell blindness. Given the artists' expertise in olfactory installations, they presumably have a highly attuned ability to describe smells. Brian and Anna did a great job with writing the label, and approached it as if writing poetry, too. Their work was installed on a pedestal with a Braille label appearing on the left side of the pedestal, with a typed label on the right side that offered conventional image description, an outline of how to engage or interact with the work, ie. "To begin, find the perfume testing strip on the back of the folded card. Dip the narrow end of the strip into the fragrance. Smell the strip. Open the card and read part 1 of the poem. This work unfolds over the course of one hour," followed by their description of the smell in italics: "*A sharp synthetic green note fades over the course of 15 minutes into an airy, grassy note, which, after 45 minutes, becomes a burnt brown-orange note.*" This tri-partite classification of a label ultimately pushes and extends what labels can be for the museum, and it also became a fruitful collaboration between the artists, and the curator.

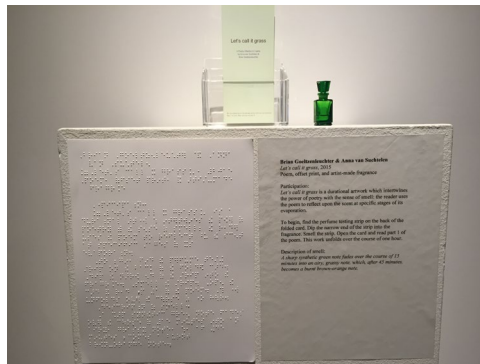


Figure 4: Braille label and typed label which includes image description and smell description for work by Brian Goeltzenleuchter and Anna van Suchtelen, *Let's call it grass*, 2015, poem, offset print, artist-made fragrance

In the Fall semester of 2022, the author collaborated with a class of students once again on audio descriptions, this time for a project that was curated for the University Art Gallery at San Diego State University. *Script/Rescript* featured the artwork of ten artists who use historical and contemporary medicalizing scripts of their own bodies to colorfully rescript – or rewrite – visual language attributed to individual conditions of disability. An X-ray, a prosthesis, a cane, a crutch, a pill, a wheelchair tire, and a syringe are among the foundations on which to build new creative layers of empowered self-described embodiment. The work in this exhibition conveyed disabled identity via new mapping, through-lines and mark-making, wherein the artists reject pathological archives by injecting their medical histories with memories, lived experiences, and sensorial attributes. The exhibition was incorporated into a class which was held in conjunction with the exhibition and taught by the author. The students were asked to develop image descriptions for each work in the exhibition, along with label copy about the works which required that the students liaise directly with the participating artists. Similar to the approach to audio descriptions and captions in *Sweet Gongs Vibrating*, the students were asked to consider

more multi-sensory styles to describe the work. The following is a strong example, by student Crystal Choi:

In the video [*Does This Feel Normal?*], shot from an above view perspective, you see a hand repeatedly banging on a round gray stone with a reflex hammer that doctors would use to hit someone's kneecap to test their reflexes. Every time the stone is struck, it moves to the side just a little bit during the process. The sound reverberates because the table is on top of concrete flooring. The repetition seems to deliver a movement of back and forth of tension and tranquility. The handle of the hammer is metallic, and the head of the hammer is rubber. There is a design of a medical gown on top of the table that extends all over the background. There is an antiseptic smell, somewhat bitter, and hints of the artificial scent found in soaps and cleaners. The video is a minute long and continues on a loop; the short film emphasizes the movement's mechanical repetition.⁸



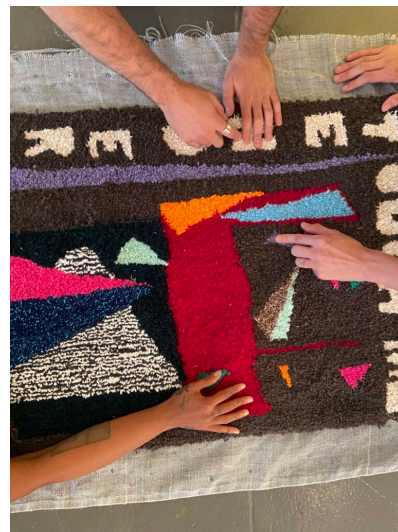
Figure 5: Jillian Crochet, *Does This Feel Normal?* 2021

Choi's description of the video incorporates descriptions of the visual aspects, alongside the movement, in addition to imagined sounds and smells. Her multi-sensory approach really brings the video to life and animates it well beyond what simply vision alone offers, benefiting a diversity of visitors both disabled and non-disabled. This work engaging with students for *Script/Script* held at the San Diego State University Art Gallery in 2022 was so successful that the gallery decided to permanently continue the practice of developing audio descriptions which are accessible to the public through QR codes.

From these powerful experiences in the audio description arena executed over the past ten years, translation is personal, subjective and performative and information can be lost or gained within each step. Audio description sheds light on the full spectrum of what it means to be human, therefore it is a transformative technology indeed. Artists and curators can and should continue to collaborate with audiences regularly to develop deep innovation within the medium. It has become more and more common for museums to integrate audio descriptions as a critical companion to their artwork (the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection database is a good one), and while a creative access approach has been taken up at a pace never witnessed before, museums are still at quite different stages of progress in making this transition. Next, haptic activism is addressed as a second element integrated into numerous exhibition case studies, and it is thus another major modality of creative access.

Haptic Activism

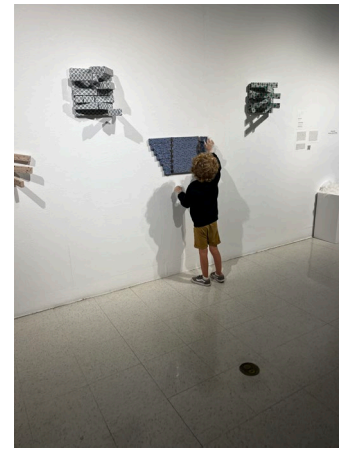
Haptic activism is a movement that believes in the pedagogical and transformative power of touch when engaging with works of art. Touch enhances and enlightens an understanding of works of art that would not otherwise be obtained by engaging with work through vision alone. Given that touch is routinely prohibited in the museum for numerous reasons, haptic activism pushes and promotes for this prohibited behavior to be dismantled, and encourages museums to think through how touch can be incorporated into exhibition experiences despite the many challenges. In 2021, during the midst of the pandemic, the author was invited to curate a show at the Art Gallery of Windsor in Ontario, Canada, which was held in the Spring of 2022. *Crip Ecologies* was developed partially as a response to how the environment and the COVID-19 crisis was unfolding, with particular emphasis on how it was impacting disabled populations. The exhibition included the work of ten contemporary disabled artists, who illustrated our complex relationships with medical systems and procedures informed by aesthetics of pain and care. After a break from curating, this exhibition was developed by the author upon discovering that many new younger-generation contemporary disabled artists had started incorporating creative access in their work. Two artists of particular interest included Ezra Benus and Yo-Yo Lin, who are both based in New York. Their work was included in *Crip Ecologies* because both artists had taken up creative access approaches in their praxis. Both artists recognized the limitations of experiencing works of art through vision alone, and as a consequence, they developed further iterations of a single artwork (say, a painting or a drawing) and developed tactile versions for audience members to engage with. In Figures 6 and 7, the reader will observe how audience members are engaging directly with Lin and Benus' works using their fingers and hands, gliding across the indentations of wood in Lin's work, and thick synthetic wools in Benus' piece. While not all of the works in *Crip Ecologies* offered this opportunity to touch for the audience, the representation of tactility was none the less important to include, even if on a minimal, although perhaps tokenistic, level.



Figures 6-7: (left) Yo-Yo Lin, X, date ; (right) Ezra Benus, X, date, installations part of *Crip Ecologies* exhibition at Art Gallery of Windsor, Ontario, curated by Amanda Cachia

Tactile engagement was also offered in *Script/Rescript*, held at the San Diego State University Art Gallery in 2022 (this exhibition was also discussed in the previous section). While the level of tactility on offer was not fully satisfactory, it was none the less present as an experience that visitors could utilize as they navigated the exhibition. It's also a reminder to curators, the museum world and the public, that the availability of tactility in exhibitions is an avenue that needs to be further explored – both literally and metaphorically. In works by Sugandha Gupta, Bhavna Mehta, Sandie (Chun-Shan) Yi, each of the artists offered material samples which were placed on pedestals or shelves on the sides of the work with instructional signage so that visitors could get a micro-sensation of the materials that the artists were using.

In the installation, *Transformers* (2021) by Dominic Quagliozi, visitors were encouraged to touch the actual works of art using gloves provided by the gallery. Figure 8 shows a detail of one of the *Transformers*, which the artist constructed by stretching used hospital gowns over the top of wood frames, akin to the style of canvas mounted to frames. On the left and right sides of the frame, the artist attached insect-like arms wrapped in the same hospital gown material using hinges, that can bend and fold back and forth across the breadth of the “torso” and to its sides. The idea is that the transformer literally transforms, much like the child’s toy of the same name. In Figure 9, the author’s nephew, Harrison Young, is engaged in moving the arms of one of the *Transformers* using gloves. He is five years old and so the installation of the *Transformers* also shows how hang-height has been adjusted to encourage more comfortable engagement for various heights. I’m looking forward to curating more exhibitions in the future where tactility can be centered even further and in a more meaningful way.



Figures 8-9: Dominic Quagliozi, *Transformers*, 2022, installation as part of *Script/Rescript* exhibition at University Art Gallery at San Diego State University, curated by Amanda Cachia

Engaging in an encounter of tactility in a museum gives the disabled and non-disabled visitors an opening, and a new advantageous position, where they are empowered through haptic aesthetics and need not rely on discursive or representational regimes in art history to validate or sanction their experience. What is especially important to note is that the tactile realm, while empowering and benefitting a disabled audience, is also equally accessible to non-disabled visitors as well, including those from various socio-economic backgrounds and class categories. In sum, there is potential for touch to become a powerful egalitarian modality if museums provide the resources to educate its public on how tactility can effectively be utilized. The

museum and its staff can do much to develop these lines of inquiry further so that museums and galleries can ultimately shift the sensorial regime once again into the next century and beyond. If the artist and curator are prepared to imaginatively engage with the work of access, then conditions of narrow standardization will eventually not only be disrupted as they transform curatorial practice and the museum and gallery experience for the visitor, but vital new approaches to art-making and thinking will thrive.

Disabled Movement

This section will discuss how disabled movement has been activated in exhibition installations to engage visitors. Through these case studies, the reader will learn how disabled artists bring the audience into a shared sense of the disabled subject's corporal conditions. The idea is that through this ambulatory political participation, some semblance of the disabled subject's various complex embodiments will bridge any gap or distance between the so-called able-bodied and disabled, and instead demonstrate a shared humanity in which we all partake, differently. In 2011, *Medusa's Mirror* was held at ProArts Gallery in Oakland. Calligraphic ink drawings by Neil Marcus, who passed away in 2021, were included in the exhibition. He used a wheelchair for his dystonia, a neurological movement disorder in which sustained muscle contractions cause twisting and repetitive movements or postures. As a writer, actor, dancer, philosopher and visual artist, Marcus constantly pushed the boundaries of dominant culture's stereotypes regarding the disabled figure in a wheelchair. Instead, he used his wheelchair to dance, cavort and fly through space, as these untitled calligraphic drawings show. The drawings were installed directly above the wheelchair ramp in the gallery, so viewers would make the connection with the physicality of access and movement and how a disabled artist thinks conceptually about mobility in unconventional, powerful ways (Figure 10). Many visitors noticed and commented on the fortuitous juxtaposition, saying that as they walked on the wheelchair ramp, they imagined dancing on wheels, like Marcus in his wheelchair, or being on rollerblades or a skateboard, gliding from one elevation to the next. In this phenomenological process, in their minds, the visitors' feet turned into other objects and forms that Marcus proved can have as much dexterity, skill and possibilities for movement. In this exchange of physical and conceptual imagining, viewers experienced another way of being and moving in the world without reducing it to simplistic stereotypes of Marcus' marginalized subjectivity as a disabled person and artist in a wheelchair.

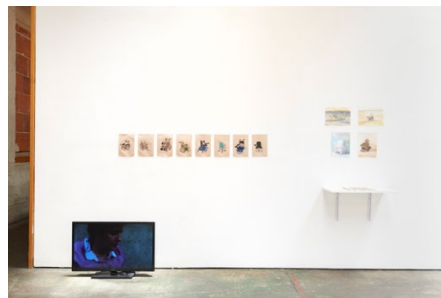


Figure 10: Installation of Neil Marcus drawing, from *Medusa's Mirror* exhibition, 2011, ProArts Gallery, Oakland

Performing Crip Time, held at Space4Art gallery in downtown San Diego in 2014, included a video installation of an outdoor performance by British artist Noëmi Laikmaer. In the documentation of the living intervention/performance, *One Morning in May* (2012), on the 28th

of May, Lakmaier set out from Toynbee Studios in Tower Hamlets towards the City of London, hoping to reach one of London's most iconic buildings, the “Gherkin.” Lakmaier has made a choice to discard and abandon her wheelchair temporarily, while she circulates and sometimes rolls her body in and around a familiar route of London on hands and knees, and occasionally stops for breaks to rest her deteriorating body and observe bustling city life (Figure 11). This normally easy one mile stroll was a slow and exhausting test of endurance. Smartly dressed in business attire she crawled through the everyday street life of London, her clothes getting increasingly dirty and torn. After seven hours she crossed the border from the Borough of Tower Hamlets to the City of London, and at the end of her arduous journey, her business suit now torn and soiled from the grime of the city’s worn streets, she smokes a cigarette to commemorate its conclusion.

The video was presented on a flat screen television which was installed on the concrete floor of the gallery, rather than mounting it to the wall or propping it up on a waist-high pedestal for more comfortable viewing for average-height visitors (Figure 12). By installing the work in this way, viewers were able to make an aesthetic conceptual connection between Noemi as she crawled across the concrete pavements of London with the flatscreen placed on the floors of the gallery. The effect gave a powerful illusion, and it was almost as if Noemi was crawling on the very floors of the gallery itself. However, this curatorial intervention was much more than creative access in this instance. Similar to the antagonistic ways that many contemporary disabled artists have engaged with their audience as a primary methodology, this installation was an antagonistic curatorial approach towards the audience, as the average-height visitor was going to be somewhat uncomfortable in their efforts to watch the work, as they were forced to either hunch down, bend or crouch to see the work on the floor. This installation favored the disabled body first, such as those in wheelchairs, instead of individuals of average height.

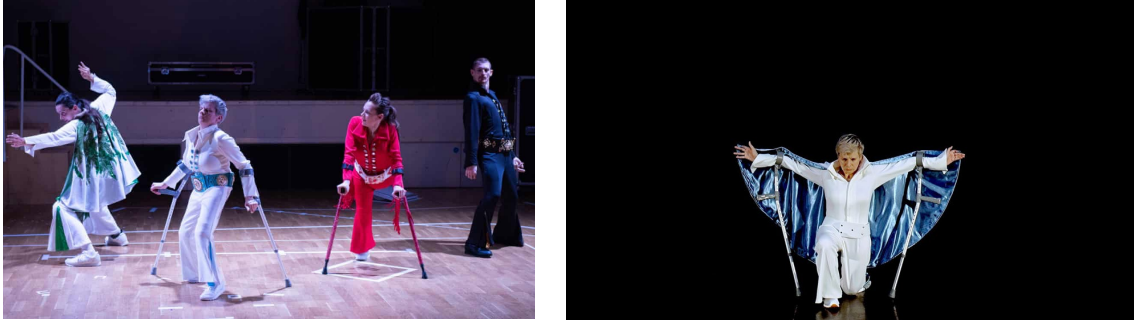


Figures 11-12: installation of Noëmi Laikmaier, *One Morning in May*, 2012, outdoor performance in *Performing Crip Time*, Space4Art San Diego, 2014

Automatisme Ambulatoire: Hysteria, Imitation, Performance was curated for the Owens Art Gallery at Mt. Saint Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick in 2019. Six contemporary artists were commissioned to develop new works focused on choreography and installation through ideas of “automatisme ambulatoire,” “hysteria” and “epilepsy” as a performance style. The artists also considered how these gestures can work to subvert, undo, transform and re-imagine the body and language, both real and imagined. “Ambulatory automatism” is an expression that conjures notions of the compulsive traveler, while simultaneously implying irresistible urges and movements such as grimaces, tics, and gestures that form relationship with corporeal pathologies. The exhibition took as its departure point an essay by scholar Rae Beth Gordon, which focuses on unconscious imitation and spectatorship in

French cabaret and early cinema. In Gordon's essay, she seeks to find correlation between the movement that was staged in early cinema with that of the movement of hysteria, epilepsy, catalepsy and other contractures of the body. Gordon felt that hysterical gesture and gait were "important inspirations for the style of frenetic, anarchic movement" that was present in early French film comedy, which had as its predecessor a clear inspiration of nervous pathology in cabaret and concert performances, both on and off the screen.⁹ Indeed, Gordon suggests that these shaking, convulsing, agitating movements of the lower order of the body symbolized the body taking over reason and thus led towards an essential loss of control. It is this pathological notion of loss of control, popular during the 18th and 19th centuries, which Gordon surmised came to be almost synonymous with "modernity" itself. Artists and poets, in addition to cabaret performers, actors and film-makers, all came to be deeply influenced by "hysteria." Surrealist artist Andre Breton described it this way: "Hysteria is a mental state...characterized by the subversion of the relationships established between the subject and the moral world...it can, from every point of view, be considered as a supreme means of expression."¹⁰ Through their diverse and established choreographic practices, which always already embrace hybrid performance-based gestures, these artists aimed to question, challenge and complicate the ethical and moral boundaries of "imitation," and how the so-called "pathologized" body might be considered under new social and cultural contemporary contexts. Through their work, they charted an evolution of the moving corpus since modern times. Through this exhibition, it is especially through the performance and portrayal of queer, disabled, and gendered subjects that the ambulatory hysteric could be reclaimed, rethought and revitalized within a social justice context.

One of the major installations in this exhibition that captured the exhibition thematic brilliantly was by Scottish choreographer and performer Claire Cunningham. *Tributary* (2019) toured to Sackville, New Brunswick, after having already been presented theatrically across numerous venues in the United Kingdom just prior to its debut in Canada. *Tributary* explored ideas of impersonation and tribute by Elvis Presley tribute artists, and links them to the ways disabled individuals may have been conditioned through medical interventions from childhood to strive for some mythical or iconic body. Looking through and into the world of the professional tribute artist, Cunningham's work also examined notions of the spectacle and control, as well as the provocation of disturbing bodies and the re-appropriation of crip movement. Similar to how the movements of the bodies in the ADA protest may have been perceived as threatening and as spectacle, Cunningham also looks at this phenomenon of Presley himself. She also poses the idea that Presley's movement was always already endowed with crip movement through his uncontrolled and spasmodic hips, playing with ideas of brokenness within the physical lines of his body (Figures 13-14). In the installation, Cunningham provided documentary residue from her live performances, which included video, costumes, and props. The artist had created jumpsuits of the style from Presley's "Vegas Era" costumes, and Cunningham and her fellow dancers customized them with a crip aesthetic. These were set up on make-shift mannequins in the installation.



Figures 13-14: Claire Cunningham, *Tributary*, 2019, performance

To emphasize this idea of disabling movement and the so-called disabled movement of Elvis Presley, Cunningham also set up a microphone and a small system karaoke with a playlist of Elvis songs that could be sung live by gallery visitors for the duration of the exhibition (see Figures 15-16). By inviting visitors to engage directly with impersonation, it gave them the opportunity to literally step into their bodies and “be with” disability (and Elvis) for a short time, whilst also having fun. Obviously, Elvis Presley has been cast into a radically new light through Cunningham’s work, but she also has us question the so-called innocent nature of imitation. If we imitate Elvis, it’s all in good fun, but if we imitate disabled bodies, this comes with a great deal more sensitivity and cautiousness. This work also suggests that Presley owes a great tribute to the pathologized disabled body to whom he too, has unwittingly imitated and embraced, much like Tobin Siebers’ concept of disability aesthetics itself – that disability has always been there, but it has never been marked as such. The movement of disability, then, is perhaps not as foreign or taboo as we may have previously thought.



Figures 15-16: Claire Cunningham, the Elvis Presley karaoke installation at Owens Art Gallery, Sackville, New Brunswick as part of *Tributary*, 2019

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that creative access is an important methodology that must be embraced by arts leaders to make our museums and cultural spaces more equitable and disability-centric. By delving into the details of how the materials of access were present across a range of exhibition case studies, specifically audio description and captions, haptic activism, and disabled movement, the intention is to provide inspiration and ideas for how other arts leaders

can approach making our arts and cultural spaces more accessible. Indeed, the exhibition case studies show that access is not as one-dimensional as people might think – it can incorporate other sensorial experiences into the work that include tactile elements, sound, captions, audio description and more. Further, the spirit of creative access suggests that it is a fluid process that takes place between the curator, artist(s), and exhibition designer so that each party reaches consensus on what it should mean in a particular time and place for a particular exhibition and audience. In part, this also means that creative access is advocating for a politics within the ordinary curator–artist–exhibition designer dialogical exchange and beyond, where each party might consider it a necessity to discuss how it will be seen, felt and heard for the benefit of a complex embodied audience. Creative access is not monolithic, nor uniform, much like the general definition of access itself, which is always going to be variable and dependent on a number of conditions. If the artist, curator and designer are prepared to imaginatively engage with the work of creative access, then conditions of narrow standardization will eventually not only be disrupted as they transform curatorial practice and the museum and gallery experience for the visitor, but vital new approaches to art-making and thinking will also thrive. The conceptual aspects of artwork should and could be tied into the display of the work as well within the architecture of the physical gallery environment, building a bridge for the audience towards greater understanding, empathy, and hopefully transformation.

The practice of deploying creative access has now become a tour de force to the extent that this essay offers just a small snapshot of the innovation that is taking place and that will continue to take place in the future. The work of creative access continues to grow and become more mainstream than ever before. In 2022, Tangled Art & Disability gallery staff co-authored an issue of the *PUBLIC* journal focusing on “Access Aesthetics.”¹¹ At the same time, *Leonardo* journal released a call for papers for a new peer-reviewed special issue titled, “CripTech and the Art of Access,” which aims to expand the existing scholarship, activism and design practices that center the aesthetics of access. It will showcase crip innovation and creativity in the fields of art, science and technology. An exhibition entitled *E.A.A.T: Experiments in Art, Access, and Technology* curated by the editors of this special issue, Vanessa Chang and Lindsey D. Felt, has also just opened at the Beall Center for Art and Technology at the University of California Irvine, from September 30, 2023 – January 13, 2024.¹² Creative access now also permeates other art worlds, including dance and theater, ranging from Dark Room Ballet, to Kinetic Light. In October 2022, *Art in America* published its first-ever issue entirely dedicated to disability arts and culture. There are multiple concentrations of scholars and contemporary disabled artists around the world who are organizing, thinking, and collaborating to generate new ways of crafting and instigating creative access. This essay ultimately suggests that arts leaders and managers must take the helm for implementing creative access in our arts organizations so that disability is a permanent part of its operations, programs, and cultures.

¹ Kristin Lindgren, Amanda Cachia, and Kelly C. George, “Growing Rhizomatically: Disability Studies, the Art Gallery and the Consortium,” in *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2014) <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/4250/3590> Accessed September 30, 2022

² For more information, see *Curating Access: Disability Art Activism and Creative Accommodation*, edited by Amanda Cachia, London and New York: Routledge, 2022.

³ David (no last name listed), “The Aesthetics of Access,” *Disability Arts International*, February 28, 2017, <https://www.disabilityartsinternational.org/resources/the-aesthetics-of-access/> Accessed November 21, 2022

⁴ For a selection of works by these scholars and artists see: Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander (eds.), *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005); Petra Kuppers, *Eco Soma: Pain and Joy in Speculative Performance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022); Petra Kuppers, *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Petra Kuppers, *Studying Disability Arts and Culture: An Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014); Petra Kuppers,

The Scar of Visibility: Medical Performances and Contemporary Art (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); *Invitation to Dance*, dir. Christian von Toppelskirch, 2016; Shayda Kafai, *Crip Kinship: The Disability Justice and Arts Activism of Sins Invalid* (Vancouver, Canada: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2021); and Alice Wong, *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2020).

⁵ Hannah Simpson, "Tics in the Theatre: The Quiet Audience, the Relaxed Performance, and the Neurodivergent Spectator," in *Theatre Topics* 28, no. 3 (November 2018): 237–38.

⁶ For more information, see Georgina Kleege, *More Than Meets The Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art* (2018) and *Sight Unseen* (1999).

⁷ Kristin Lindgren, Amanda Cachia, and Kelly C. George, "Growing Rhizomatically: Disability Studies, the Art Gallery and the Consortium," in *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2014) <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/4250/3590> Accessed September 30, 2022

⁸ Crystal Choi audio description for Jillian Crochet, October 2022, San Diego State University

⁹ Rae Beth Gordon, "From Charcot to Charlot: Unconscious Imitation and Spectatorship in French Cabaret and Early Cinema," in *The Mind of Modernism: Medicine, Psychology, and the Cultural Arts in Europe and America, 1880-1940*, Mark S. Micale (ed.), Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004, 94.

¹⁰ Breton quoted by Gordon, *Ibid.*, 124.

¹¹ Mary Bunch, Julia Chan, Sean Lee, "Introduction: Access Aesthetics – Towards a Prefigurative Cultural Politics," in *PUBLIC*, Issue 66,

"Access Aesthetics," 2022, 12.

¹² For more information, see <https://beallcenter.uci.edu/exhibitions/eaat-experiments-art-access-and-technology> Accessed October 26, 2023