THE POLITICS OF «CREATIVE ACCESS»: GUIDELINES FOR A CRITICAL DIS/ABILITY CURATORIAL PRACTICE*

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Abstract: In this chapter, I offer guidelines or instructions accompanied by examples for a critical dis/ability curatorial practice, which involves an application of «creative access». «Creative access» extends from the generally understood meaning of «access», which is the ability to approach and use something. Access typically encompasses qualities of ease, according to Elizabeth Ellcessor, which might involve, for example, «user-friendliness of a system, or financial affordability»[1]. In the context of a critical curatorial practice, where curators are understood to provide «access» to an audience in terms of an exhibition's content through objects, ideas and text, adding the word «creative» to curatorial «access» has a political agenda. First, the idea of «creative access» is manifold: on the one hand, the goal of «creative access» is to advance a more complex curatorial model for contemporary art exhibitions that can be made accessible to an array of complex embodiments, where, for example, American Sign Language, captioning, and written and audio translations of sound and image are embedded into the material, structural and conceptual aspects of an exhibition. On the other hand, «creative access» also means an active curatorial engagement with artists who use «access» as a conceptual framework in

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their practice, so that a curator's notion of access and an artists' interpretation of access are conflated and juxtaposed in an exhibition, providing a dynamic dialogic exchange between the physical and the conceptual, or the praxis and the theory.

Keywords: disability art, creative access, disability curatorial practice, guidelines for accessible art exhibitions.

INTRODUCTION: CURATORS' ACCESSING ACCESS CREATIVELY

My stake in the work of «creative access» is from the perspective of a curator who identifies as physically disabled and who has been deploying «creative access» in all my exhibitions since 2011. Not only has my curatorial work engaged in «creative access», but my exhibitions have also engaged in social justice themes focused on disability and the disabled body. I have curated these exhibitions with the ambition of transforming reductive associations of the disabled body at large, in tandem with introducing audiences to Tobin Siebers' idea of «disability aesthetics», illustrating his concepts through the art objects on display and providing alternative definitions of aesthetics[2]. My projects have also explored activist positions within specific disabled community groups, including people with dwarfism, people who are deaf and/or hearing impaired, and people who are blind and/or visually impaired. My commitment to these themes called for an equal but also robust commitment to access, given that projects focused on disability must also surely consider the audience member who identifies as disabled. Therefore, I found myself not only paying attention to the artist and their work as part of conventional curatorial labor, but I also had to focus new energy into considering access in creative and conceptual ways that could be enlivened both practically and conceptually.

Some of the earlier examples of my projects engaging with «creative access» is when I started with *Medusa's Mirror* at ProArts Gallery in Oakland (2011), where I decided to record audio descriptions of the artwork on an old iPod. I left my iPod at the Front Desk so that the audience could listen to these at their leisure, and to open the idea that the curator can provide information about an artwork that is less interpretative and more descriptive, on both subjective and objective terms. For *What Can A Body Do?* at Haverford College in Pennsylvania (2012), I continued to extend the idea that audio descriptions could be more creative by allowing students from the college to participate in the recordings. I had at least three descriptions per object, so that audio descriptions were offering numerous channels of information from multiple and, ostensibly amateur, perspectives, debunking the idea that audio description must be left solely to the professionals.

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[2] SIEBERS, 2010.

I argue that «creative access» is an important tool to deploy within a critical dis/ability curatorial practice because it elevates and complicates our rudimentary, although no less important, understanding of access in the museum. This is because «creative access» embodies both conceptual and physical possibilities, where the very idea of «access» can be discovered in an artists' work, and can be fruitfully curated into exhibitions, while at the same time, it can be incorporated into projects under the leadership and imagination of the curator. «Creative access» then calls for curators to weave in a new aspect to their practice that demands a consideration for a greater diversity of bodies, represented both in the complex embodiment and consequently the objects by artists with whom they work, and also the audience themselves that visit the museum and consume their ideas. What I am suggesting is that «creative access» perhaps offers a more compelling intellectual engagement with typical notions of access: through its regular and consistent deployment, the curator, artist, and audience member will enhance their knowledge of standard conventions such as captioning, whilst also enjoying how artists engage with such conventions creatively. Perhaps this will motivate curators to take on the work of access in more meaningful, concentrated ways. This is not to water down the significance of providing conventional physical access, and those professionals who execute such work, such as captionists and sign language interpreters. Rather, «creative access» can be both practical and creative at once.

Offering «creative access» in the form of guidelines is important, because it acknowledges a significant absence in curatorial practice that has long ignored the work of access. The work of access is most often conducted by education staff in museums, as it is seen as a physical consideration and indeed, a legal stipulation, that must be executed in a usually non-creative, logical manner. «Creative access» instead suggests that there is much conceptual material to be found in the ideology of access, through a collaborative curatorial and artistic engagement. I offer my guidelines, beginning with the strategic and concluding with the tactical, with the same spirit of revolutionary intent that an artist has historically developed through the manifesto. The manifesto has an important place in art history, with significant contributions by artists within various art movements that proved pivotal to transforming art movements that came before their time, while shaping the movement they envisioned for their contemporary moment that would speak to their current political beliefs and ideologies. Landmark manifestos include F. T. Marinetti's *Manifesto on Futurism* (1909), *The First Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) by André Breton, Allan Kaprow's manifesto on the «blurring of art and life» (1966) and the Guerilla Girls feminist slogan artworks (1985-90). I am inspired by the legacy of the manifesto as a tool that represents disruption, a call for change, and a signpost, notice, and semiotic for «alert-ness». I am also inspired by the work of non-visual learner Carmen Papalia, who developed a similar list of playful, if ambiguous, suggestions for museum access from his perspective as a person who is blind for an issue of *Disability*

Studies Quarterly (Papalia, 2013). While Papalia's work is important, it doesn't necessarily account for the diversity of all bodies. For example, he calls for a viewership of an object that demands an audience member to crawl along the ground. While I appreciate Papalia's antagonistic take towards a «reversal» of access that involves making physical space more uncomfortable for the able-bodied viewer, he doesn't necessarily consider what this means for other disabled users. For instance, crawling might prove difficult for someone who is a wheelchair user or was born without a certain number of limbs. So within the chapter, I offer my guidelines as a list of to-do items, or a template for how one might enact this critical curatorial dis/ability curatorial practice for the benefit of a wide range of users. It is a work in progress, mostly because it is unfinished, but also because I have not yet exhausted of all the list's possibilities, and because each item assumes an atmosphere of experimentation. One thing that is certain is that access must constantly be open to revision, as access is individual and cannot ever speak to a so-called «universal» subject in a museum, according to Danielle Linzer and Cindy Vanden Bosch, which is quite the antithesis to the societal constructs that we currently operate under[3].

GUIDELINES FOR ACCESSIBLE ART EXHIBITIONS

1. Curator, artist(s) and venue should work collaboratively on all access components;

2. Carefully consider the needs of the audience, as this differs from venue to venue, but remember that access is also a symbolic political gesture that should be provided as a means to transform museum practice in general. In other words, access should be implemented, regardless on if a guaranteed «disabled» audience will be present (see Sandals 2016);

3. The curator should consider incorporating work by disabled artists in the exhibition as a means to offer a «disability» perspective in the work itself, especially in ways that artworks engages conceptually with access. Beyond this, curators can also encourage new modalities for the production of works of art by artists who do not identify as disabled;

4. Use of the wheelchair symbol: the usage of this symbol in labels and other informational formats should be considered in order to make connections with disability community and so that audiences understand that an institution and curators/artists are sympathetic and mindful of their disabled audiences;

5. An accessible website as an accompaniment to an exhibition is ideal, where it can be designed so that it is screen-reader friendly. (See WebAim's «Designing for Screen Reader Compatibility»). It is also ideal to design the website for

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[3] LINZER & BOSCH, 2013.

low-vision and colorblind accessibility, where the font, size, and other settings on the screen can easily be adjusted;

6. Timing: Implement all accessible components well in advance of an exhibition opening — 3 months is ideal;

7. Budget: Incorporate sufficient funds in the budget for all appropriate access components as a critical part of the overall enterprise;

8. An honorarium should be incorporated into the artist and curator fees if there is specific labor attached to creating accessible components, such as asking either party to develop the audio descriptions, and/or an accessible website;

9. Arrange for Braille label copy through organizations like Lighthouse for the Blind;

10. Text-based label copy to be in 18 point, san-serif font. This is because a larger font size is easier to read for people with vision impairments. San-serif fonts are also known to be more accessible for people with vision impairments as the extending features of the «serifs» at the end of a stroke in a word can be confusing and distracting for the task of identifying the letter;

11. Audio descriptions to be made available for each work. These audio files can be uploaded on the venue's website (or the artist and/or curator's websites) in order for people to download and listen to the files using their phones or another device. Ideally, there is a device that is already provided by the gallery that is made secure to prevent theft. Information on how to create audio descriptions can be found at the Art Beyond Sight website, and an online site where descriptions can be recorded is called Vocaroo. For examples on how I have implemented «creative» audio descriptions into my own work, see «What Can a Body Do?» at Haverford College in Pennsylvania in 2012, where there are multiple audio descriptions for each object, or in the case of «Marking Blind», there are also written transcripts of the audio files (with an Irish accent!), which offers more access to access;

12. Artwork hung at a level between 4-5 feet; in the event that the work cannot be hung lower, display a sign that offers the viewer with the opportunity to see the work in an alternative format. This format may take the form of a book with images, or an online resource of images. I implemented this strategy when I curated *Composing Dwarfism: Reframing Short Stature in Contemporary Photography* at Space4Art in San Diego as I wanted to be sure that people of short stature could effectively access the work in the gallery space.

Fig. 1. Installation of *Composing Dwarfism: Reframing Short Stature in Contemporary Photography*, Space4Art, San Diego, 2014. Photo courtesy of Michael Hansel

13. Encourage artists to make art that can be touched where possible, and ideally, touched at all times as part of a strategy towards haptic activism. However, if touching in the gallery cannot be supervised sufficiently, then it is important to develop regular touch tours etc. For example, I curated an exhibition at the San Diego Art Institute in 2016 entitled *Sweet Gongs Vibrating*, which was a multimedia, multisensory exhibition that broke with the ocularcentric by embracing myriad modes of perception. This project aspired to activate the sensorial qualities of objects to illustrate alternative narratives regarding access, place and space for the benefit of a more diverse audience, especially for people with visual impairments and/or blindness. I was especially interested in challenging the occularcentric modality of curating exhibitions, and the tendency to rely on the convention that objects must be experienced through vision alone. It was my attempt at curatorial haptic activism as an off-shoot to «creative access», as I aimed to have the visitor directly touch all works in the exhibition as much as possible. (To learn more about the history of touch in the museum, see Candlin, 2010). This proved difficult owing to insufficient resources of the gallery, however, I did engage with many of the artists in the project to request haptic-based pieces for the exhibition. One example was a video installation by Canadian artist Raphaëlle de Groot entitled *Study 5: A New Place* (2015). In order to achieve the activation of the modality of touch for the audience member that I was seeking in de Groot's work, I asked her if I could include the original found materials that she used to create her make-shift head-mask seen in the video. The artist then allowed me to place the work as a disorderly bundle on top of a pedestal in front of a projection of the accompanying video. The projected video literally broke through the flat two-dimensional visual representation on the wall so that we

could not only see the physical detritus of what the artist was experimenting with on her face and head, but the viewer could, importantly, touch it. As a gallery visitor engaged with touching the bundle of scraps, I wanted them to explore the varied surfaces of de Groot's papers, ropes, roughly-formed pieces of charcoal, plastic and other materials. If one was hearing and seeing, then one could visually observe how their touching actions mirrored the touching of the same materials taking place by de Groot in the video as she covered her head, and/or one could hear how the crinkle, crinkle, crunch, crunch noise to emerge as a result of hands making impact with crumpled paper were echoed in the sounds emanated from de Groot's same haptics. Extending de Groot's work in this way was a bid to achieve a heightened level of tactile engagement, and I argue that it is these types of «creative access» interventions that need to be encouraged as we consider the expansion of the sensorian and haptic activism within our museums and galleries.

Figs. 2-3. Raphaëlle de Groot, installation shots of *Study 5, A New Place* (2015) in *Sweet Gongs Vibrating*, San Diego Art Institute, 2016, curated by Amanda Cachia. Photos by Emily Corkery

I also negotiated for the same method of «creative access» with another artist in the exhibition. San Francisco-based artist Darrin Martin included a video entitled *Objects Unknown: Sounds Familiar* (2016), where fragmented, layered abstract forms were projected onto a wall, moving up and down in a long, thin, vertical strip similar in shape and function to a film strip. I had asked the artist to produce a three-dimensional version of these abstract shapes, so that they could be accessible to the touch. The artist decided to use 3D printing technology to create scans of the objects from collaged foam packing material. It is thus these same objects that have been animated digitally and then merged via analog video tools that further abstract the image and produce sound through the manipulation of electronic frequencies. Mounted on pedestals that also serve as speakers, the printed objects vibrated with the same sounds emanating from their projected counterparts.

Fig. 4-5. Darrin Martin, installation shots of *Objects Unknown: Sounds Familiar* (2016) in *Sweet Gongs Vibrating*, San Diego Art Institute, 2016, curated by Amanda Cachia. Photos by Emily Corkery

14. An American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter should be arranged to accompany all speaking engagements. It is also ideal to ensure that a permanent curator's talk//tour in ASL can be made available through various technology devices and also permanently online. For a template, see the Whitney Museum of American Art's vlog. When I curated *LOUD silence* at the Grand Central Art Center at California State University and then later on, at gallery@Calit2 at the University of California San Diego, I used this Whitney template to create both DIY and professional videos that were made available on iPads and online during the run of the exhibition. One was filmed on an iPhone and editing using software on a laptop at home, while the other was created in a professional television studio on a university campus. While the quality is indicative of the resources available for each project, the objective is the same: to provide access to a deaf and/or hearing-impaired audience, especially given that the exhibition itself focused on the experiences of sound and silence from a deaf and hearing-impaired perspective.

Fig. 6-7. Screen shots of Amanda Cachia providing a curator's tour of *LOUD silence* accompanied by American Sign Language interpreters (on left at Grand Central Art Center, and right at the University of California San Diego)

15. All videos with sound should be captioned. If a video cannot be captioned (or any other object that makes sound), then a listing of the sounds can be included on the label.

16. Similarly, if there are scent-based works in an exhibition, a description of the odors can also be provided. This is what I did for my *Sweet Gongs Vibrating* project at the San Diego Art Institute (along with Braille labels and instructions for how to «participate» in the work.
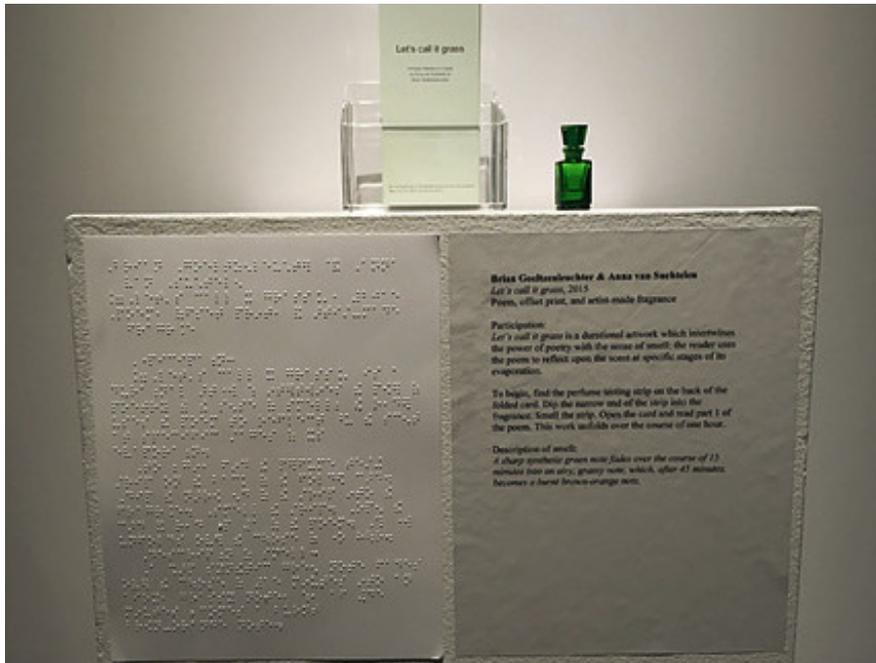

Fig. 8. Brian Goeltzenleuchter & Anna van Suchtelen, *Lets call it grass*, 2015, poetry olfaction in 3 parts as part of *Sweet Gongs Vibrating* at the San Diego Art Institute. Photo by Emily Corkery

CONCLUSION: MATERIAL AND IDEOLOGICAL ACCESS IN THE MUSEUM

In this chapter, I have attempted to build a constellation of approaches to the methodology of «creative access» within my guidelines and some curatorial examples in order to illustrate its conceptual and physical possibilities for the artist, curator, and ultimately, the audience member who engages with the object and/or work. «Creative access» has both material and ideological components that are meant to stimulate physical, cognitive and sensorial functions of the human body. Access is not as one-dimensional as people might think because it can incorporate other sensorial experiences into the work that include tactile elements, sound, captions, audio description, and more. In the execution of this work, I have found both artists to be responsive and receptive to my ideas, as much as I have been inspired by theirs. Therefore, the spirit of «creative access» suggests that it is a fluid process that takes place between the curator and artist(s) so that each party reaches consensus on what «creative access» 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 dialogical exchange, where each party might consider it a necessity to discuss how «creative access» will be

seen, felt, and heard for the benefit of a complex embodied audience. Each instance in this essay where «creative access» has been deployed has also attempted to indicate how the artist/curator exchange on its critical import has evolved. In other words, «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 and curator 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 thrive.

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