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BACHELOR'S THESIS

**Creatively Accessible: Prioritizing Accessibility Practices in the
Curation of Virtual Artistic Spaces**

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**Kreativní přístupnost: Upřednostňování Postupů Inkluze při
Kurátorování Virtuálních Uměleckých Prostorů**

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Přidělovaný akademický titul: BcA.

Praha, Duben 2023

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Keywords:

accessibility; curatorial; disability studies; algorithmic bias; politics of access; inclusion; virtual exhibition; crip culture; digital sociology; universal design

Klíčová slova:

přístupnost; kurátorství; 'disability studies'; algoritmické zkreslení; politika přístupu; inkluze; virtuální výstava; kultura 'crip'; digitální sociologie; univerzální design

ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to examine the role of the curator in providing greater access to virtual artistic spaces for disabled people and artists, focusing particularly on the vital integration of creative accessibility into contemporary curatorial practices, and for greater emphasis on disability awareness at the intersections of art and technology to reduce barriers to digital inclusion. Under discussion will be the potential to create welcoming and accessible artistic spaces if given the proper attention and structures to allow access to all visitors, as well as the limiting design and biases of digital technologies and virtual environments which may actively exclude viewers. Using the lens of digital sociology, attention will be paid to the ways in which digital inclusion influences aspects of community, individuality, creativity, and independence, particularly for those with disabilities.

Analysis of both successful and lacking curatorial disability accommodation within physical gallery and museum spaces will be considered in the discussion to bring understanding to the past and evolving states of accessibility in more traditional art spaces. Utilizing this history as a precursor to how curation and discourses around digital accessibility are being structured, it will become possible to further investigate and evaluate specific exclusionary practices and hurdles, as well as to identify areas in which those with disabilities are still not being considered and included in the organization and design of contemporary art spaces both on and offline. Ultimately, the goal of this thesis is to emphasize the necessity of standards for accessible digital curation across platforms as a means to allowing for maximum audience access, and to elevate and enhance the experience and connection to virtual art and environments.

ABSTRAKT

Tato práce se snaží prozkoumat roli kurátora při zajišťování lepší přístupnosti k virtuálnímu uměleckému prostoru pro zdravotně postižené návštěvníky a umělce.. Zaměřuje se zejména na zásadní integraci tvůrčí přístupnosti do současné kurátorské praxe a klade důraz na povědomí o zdravotním postižení při protnutí umění a technologií tak, aby se snížily překážky digitální inkluze. V této souvislosti práce diskutuje vytváření přívětivých a přístupných uměleckých prostor v těch případech, kdy se jim věnuje náležitá pozornost. Dále budou v diskusi obsaženy struktury umožňující přístup všem návštěvníkům, a také problematika omezujícího designu a předsudečné povahy digitálních technologií a virtuálních prostředí, které mohou diváky aktivně vylučovat. S využitím optiky digitální sociologie bude věnována pozornost způsobům, jakými digitální inkluze ovlivňuje aspekty komunity, individuality, kreativity a nezávislosti, zejména u osob se zdravotním postižením.

V diskusi bude zohledněna analýza úspěšných i chybějících kurátorských úprav pro osoby se zdravotním postižením ve fyzických prostorách galerií a muzeí, aby se přiblížila minulost a vyvíjející se okolnosti přístupnosti v tradičnějších uměleckých prostorách. S využitím této historie jako předchůdce k tomu, jak jsou kurátorství a diskurzy týkající se digitální přístupnosti strukturovány, bude možné dále zkoumat a hodnotit konkrétní vylučující praktiky a překážky a také identifikovat oblasti, v nichž osoby se zdravotním postižením stále nejsou brány v potaz a zahrnuty do organizace a designu prostorů současného umění jak na internetu, tak mimo něj. V konečném důsledku je cílem této práce zdůraznit nutnost zavedení standardů pro přístupnou digitální kurátorskou praxi napříč platformami jako prostředek umožňující maximální přístup publika, povznesení a posílení zážitku, spojení s virtuálním uměním a prostředím.

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PREFACE

Let me preface this work with a brief statement about my connection to the topics discussed and to establish certain positions regarding broader discussions and research around disability theory and access in general.

To begin, I want to underscore that I as the author of this piece, identify as a white, cis-gendered woman who is able-bodied. Thus, as an individual whose privilege alleviates me from many of the experiences and problems I discuss in this piece, my purpose in writing my thesis around topics of disability inclusion is not based on my own identity and experiences, and therefore should not be understood as trying to take on the part of a primary voice speaking on such topics. I acknowledge that my position is one outside of the main communities in which I direct my focus within this work.

I chose to work with this topic to build a better understanding of my own interest and research of the current discourses around access and how they intersect with contemporary artistic curation which is the field I intend to pursue in further studies and eventually as a profession. Therefore, the primary purpose of this thesis is to form for myself and anyone interested, a base for the topic of digital access and inclusion, as well as to provide resources and questions to prompt me and anyone interested to explore these topics more. In no way do I intend for my position and suggestions to be taken as the most accurate, important, or urgent within the context of digital access. As I reiterate in the final chapter of this thesis, I am aware of my position in conjunction with these themes and therefore wish to make it clear that for anyone interested in the topics discussed, the most important component is listening to those for whom these issues make up a large part of their lives, and that going forward, the most progress will be forged through networked collaboration.

I have a strong belief that for the issue of accessibility, as holds true within numerous discourses, the loudest voices should be those directly within the populations affected, and that research and writings surrounding these issues should always include information, first-hand experiences, and observations by those who are part of the populations being analyzed. As this is a bachelor's thesis, I was not able due to time and length restrictions to include these kinds of first-hand accounts and perspectives in the ways I wish I could have. As I intend to work with this topic more in future writing, my goal moving forward is from the very beginning of the process, to start ongoing dialogues with individuals within disability communities, to incorporate and highlight their perspectives and ideas into my research and the research of others, as I feel is unfortunately not done enough, yet imperative to building accurate and truly helpful solutions and initiatives. The motto "Nothing About Us Without Us" reinforces this principle of participation,

and it has been used by Disabled Peoples Organizations throughout the years as part of the global movement to achieve the full participation and equalization of opportunities for, by, and with persons with disabilities.

As I have only begun to scratch the surface in terms of familiarizing myself with ways in which disabled people have faced obstacles that I and my privilege could hardly imagine, I find myself more and more passionate about striving for a world in which no individual is excluded from any creative and artistic endeavor or experience they may wish to participate in. This is a future I do not intend to attempt to create on my own. Instead, I am hopeful that through collaboration and much more learning from individuals and theorists alike, I might be a small part of shaping the kind of artistic landscape that myself and numerous others know is the sort of future that through difficult work and collaboration, is not only essential but entirely possible.

INTRODUCTION

Pinpointing and fully understanding the contemporary role of the curator in today's art and social circles is a daunting task. As an individual who is relatively new to the curatorial realm and is working to define a personal relationship to it as well as my own curatorial style and theoretical framework, it is impossible to ignore the complexity of the role and its numerous definitions have become increasingly clear to me. Descriptions of a curator in the present age are no longer confined to art historians pouring over historic collection preservation, or to those who place and rearrange pictures on walls inside galleries. Curating has unfolded far beyond the strict confines of any artistic institution. Influenced by the rapidly expanding digitized society underpinning and revolutionizing the game for countless professions, curators have wasted no time in seizing the opportunities of such a pivotal social shift, exploding into a collaborative, experimental field of work, both digital and physical, and creating its own rules, theory, and trajectories.

Presently, the contemporary conception of a curator is multifaceted, interdisciplinary, and collaborative, remaining constantly in flux in form, content, theory, and social and global relations. Social media creators curate eye-catching Instagram feeds and blog galleries, DJ's and musicians organize curated playlists and live-streamed shows, museums invite viewers to curate their own exhibitions online during Covid-19 by dragging and dropping images together and posting the results to Facebook. Obviously, curating is being used in a greater variety of contexts than ever before,¹ not only can bringing these other disciplines closer art, but bringing art into those areas.²

At its core, I maintain that the curatorial role remains one dedicated to care, connections, broadening discourse, interpretation, and collaboration. While these tasks have never been simple, a world saturated with digital capabilities presents new and unique challenges, as well as opportunities. From a curatorial perspective, digital technologies and the internet have created completely new possibilities for artistically as well as curatorially exploring a topic. Regardless of the curator's purpose, be it the display of digital artworks or conceiving an entire digital framework for art, "digital exhibiting expands curatorial work with regard to its modes of production, presentation and reception."³

¹ Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Ways of Curating*, 2014.

² Ibid, 169.

³ Ackermann and Egger, *Meta-Curating: Online Exhibitions Questioning Curatorial Practice in the Digital Age*, 2020.

One such example of explosion of technology into the art world, is the allowance of room for the exploration of artistic spaces to exist both physically and virtually. Be it large, publicly funded institutions or independent galleries, it's almost a necessity in today's world for these kinds of art institutions to be represented digitally. From Instagram feeds depicting the latest exhibition documentation at the Jewish Museum in New York City to entirely re-imagined and navigable virtual pavilions in the Venice Biennale of Arts, art institutions are clearly expanding into incorporating digital platforms for their power in mass distribution, advertisement, participatory ease, and creative outreach. Curators of today have much more to take into account than merely the physicality of their projects. The entirely new and massively important component of organization and accessibility of these new digital art spaces must now be taken into consideration with just as much care.

With the advancement of technology and the creation of virtual art galleries and spaces, there exists a pressing need to prioritize inclusion of those with disabilities early on and throughout the curatorial process. In terms of accessibility, these digital art spaces, from digitized versions of museum archives to fully realized interactive environment installations, were traditionally given much less priority than physical art spaces.

Virtual counterparts to museums and galleries are hugely important resources for marginalized communities, particularly for those with disabilities. For instance, many disabled people are not able to visit museums physically. But virtual visits, although not exactly the same experience, can provide an alternative.⁴ But digital art spaces provide more for disability communities than simply acting as alternatives to brick and mortar art experiences. These virtual spaces can provide platforms for community building, with spaces being used to connect with others to share experiences and foster a sense of community and support. As art has been shown to have therapeutic benefits for people with disabilities, virtual exhibitions and creative spaces can provide a place for them to engage in this healing process. And by providing platforms for people with disabilities to showcase their own artwork and engage in meaningful interaction and discussion of topics expressed within digital exhibitions and events, these creative spaces can empower individuals to break down stigmas associated with disability, and spread awareness of deeply engrained ableism within the art world.

While physical art spaces have been slowly working to adapt broader and better enforced accessibility regulations, virtual galleries and virtual art viewing have not been given the same attention. Though necessary, current standards such as those outlined by the ADA (Americans with Disability Act) or the newer and still in progress WAI (Web Accessibility

⁴ Allen and Minion, *Inclusive Curation and Production Creates Inclusive Museums*, in *Inclusive Digital Interactive: Best Practices and Research*, 2020.

Initiative), are still ill-equipped to fully address the social and cultural components of access. Furthermore, “accessibility in these contexts is primarily discussed in terms of last-minute accommodations made by cultural institutions rather than something that can and should be incorporated by cultural producers into their creative practice from the start.”⁵

As digital artistic spaces become more commonplace, we must focus on expanding the field of curation to encompass awareness on accessibility of virtual galleries and digital art, in order to ensure that anyone and everyone can access, create, or be inspired by art and culture. Emphasis must be placed to ensure we will not reinforce biases towards able-minded and bodied individuals, as has been observed within traditional physical art gallery and exhibition structures.

In order to begin this work, it is essential that we examine the exclusivity of technology and programming and the ways in which our curatorial practices may evolve and expand in order to address and advocate for universal design within the art world and beyond. Accessibility should not just be a hidden checkbox when curating a digital space, especially in artistic contexts where representation and inclusivity should be paramount.

Creatively Accessible will explore both the importance of prioritizing creative digital accessibility in curatorial practices of virtual artistic spaces and its potential as a means to disrupt exclusionary practices within the programming and technology used to construct such spaces. We will discuss existing accessibility practices in both physical and virtual art spaces and galleries, examine exclusionary biases within technology and programming, and identify necessary starting points of accessibility features to ensure incorporation and inclusivity of all individuals within these virtual environments.

⁵ Liza Sylvestre, *Generative Forms of Experimental Access*, in *Disability Arts Activism and Creative Accommodation*, Ed. Amanda Cachia, 2022.

Chapter I

DEFINING DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY AND THE VIRTUAL NEEDS OF INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

Much like the role of the curator, the landscape of accessibility with its numerous applications, technological and physical features, and ethical components is broad and multifaceted. By definition, accessibility is the aim to design systems in order to optimize access and therefore promote inclusivity of all individuals to all kinds of spaces, physical or otherwise. Being inclusive entails giving equal access and opportunities to everyone, wherever possible. “Digital accessibility specifically entails the use of thoughtful and inclusive design for websites, apps, and technology so disabled people can interact with them in a meaningful and equivalent way.”⁶

To promote digital access throughout platforms and hardware alike, artists and curators, should first become acquainted with the numerous ways in which people with disabilities interact with the web and technology, and determine the sorts of obstacles they may encounter as they go. This is of course no simple task. There is no single way to be disabled, and even those who share a type of disability such as blindness, will each live a disabled experience that is inherently individual to them. Thus, it is impossible to create a single set of accessibility standards or to address one group of expectations of an entire community in a singular way. In an effort to keep this information as comprehensible as possible, the following overview will be condensed and simplified, but aims to provide a general introduction to the kinds of interactions that different communities of disabled individuals have with web spaces, and some difficulties they may encounter if these spaces have not been designed accessibly.

When addressing accessibility, particularly in the digital context, there are generally several categories of impairments that it is necessary to focus on. An impairment, by definition, is the limitation of a person’s physical, mental, or sensory function on a long-term basis. These categories include:

Vision: Blindness, low vision, and color blindness.

Hearing: Deaf and hard of hearing .

Motor: Limited motor control, partial or full loss of function in body part or parts, and loss of stamina, strength.

Cognitive: Learning disabilities, distractibility, inability to focus on large amounts of information.

⁶ Carrie Fisher. *What Is Digital Accessibility, and Why Does It Matter?*, Web.dev, <https://web.dev/learn/accessibility/why/>.

To give some examples, people who experience visual impairments may face challenges due to a lack of ability to magnify or adjust page or page element size, or to accurately see texts or images that are too small. People with motor impairments may face barriers due to a cluttered layout, links and buttons that are too small, as well as other important navigability roadblocks that may render entire functions and sites unusable for them. Those who are deaf or hard of hearing might encounter audio or video that has not been properly captioned or accompanied by a textual reference. People with cognitive impairments like dementia, autism, or even learning disabilities, may confront problems with layout, design, and confusing navigability. Additionally, decorative or visual elements such as flickering screens and flashes that are not adjusted or labelled with warnings could create health risks such as seizures.⁷

Many individuals with disabilities are able to navigate and engage in virtual environments and overcome potential limiting features through the use of assistive and adaptive technologies. Although often used as synonyms for one another, these terms refer to items or technologies created specifically for use by people with disabilities, or anything used for different purposes but then adapted to aid disabled individuals, respectively. When designed or used well, these technologies are able to improve quality of life and help individuals achieve independence on numerous day-to-day tasks both online and offline. When developing digital platforms and spaces, it is necessary to consider such assistive technologies and if they will be able to accurately interact with and guide users through the spaces. If not considered, many of these assistive aids will unfortunately not be able to function properly, but if considered in the design process from the beginning, they will allow those who use them to engage equally and dynamically with whatever aspects of the platform they wish to.

Countless assistive technologies exist for aiding in web navigation. Screen readers are a common example. “These systems are housed within devices such as computers or smartphones and are able to identify text within a platform and convert it to be spoken aloud so as to provide auditory navigation of platforms otherwise intended for visual navigation.”⁸ This assistive tech was developed with the purpose of aiding computer users who suffer from some kind of vision loss and are therefore prevented from seeing screen content clearly.

Screen magnifiers and zoom-in browsers, also used by those with visual impairments, allow users control over the size of the various texts and graphics on a screen and more general customization of the overall viewing lens of a web page.⁹ As many people who identify as blind

⁷ Thomas Weiss. *People with Disabilities and Technology Challenges*, Disabled World Library of Website Accessibility Publications, 2013. <https://www.disabled-world.com/disability/accessibility/websitedesign/tech-challenge.php>

⁸ Gilbert, *Inclusive Design for a Digital World: Designing with Accessibility in Mind*, 2018.

⁹ *Ibid*, 125.

or low-vision do still retain some kind of sight, a magnification option can be useful for those who just need mild assistance with viewing difficult fonts or especially small texts. Browsers and web pages coded to accommodate zoom-in features will also help tremendously with individualized navigation.

Assistive technologies also exist in the form of tools for people with movement or dexterity limitations. Suppose that someone is unable to use their hands and fingers to operate a keyboard or laptop touchpad. Alternate input devices allow users to bypass these traditional keyboard and mouse setups or adapt their ability to use them in new ways. Head pointers for instance, consist of a stick or object mounted directly onto the user's head that can be used to push keys on a keyboard. Simplified versions of mouses or keypads, such as switch controllers and single switch devices, can be used with on-screen keyboards, allowing the user to simply click one button to select any letter or character, and can even be linked for use as a mouse to access links and page changes. Motion tracking or eye tracking is also an option and "allows for devices to watch a target or even the eyes of the user to interpret where the user wants to place and move the mouse pointer on a screen."¹⁰

As previously mentioned, while all of these assistive technologies provide digital users regardless of disability a means of access to virtual environments and their navigation, without the proper forethought of designers and curators into the access of those with disabilities to these spaces, such technologies may be rendered useless. Webpages or platforms that have not been properly formatted or coded to accommodate and support the use of certain assistive technologies, particularly entirely digital ones such as screen readers, will exclude users who rely on such assistance. Therefore, in an artistic landscape growing increasingly reliant on platforms and their functionality to all viewers they attract, it is imperative that curators not only consider, but actively prioritize and practice, an awareness of accessibility needs and assistive technology inclusion. By acting with an informed knowledge of the ways people with disabilities engage with digital content, it will become possible for these curators and designers to anticipate and accommodate the needs of these individuals in a digital context, and to ensure that no viewer is prohibited or excluded from participation and engagement.

¹⁰ Gilbert, *Inclusive Design for a Digital World: Designing with Accessibility in Mind*, p. 130.

Chapter II

REDEFINING CURATION FOR THE DIGITAL ERA

“Crippling the Institution” through Curatorial Collaboration

As previously stated, the contemporary role of the curator is relatively new, amassing numerous definitions and responsibilities as it has moved away from its earlier versions. However, “despite the wide acceptance that the role has become professionalized and independent from stricter constraint, the core of what really constitutes contemporary curating and curatorial thinking is still not entirely possible to pinpoint”.¹¹ Considering this open and constantly evolving nature of curating, it feels necessary to add onto and expand current discourses around the curator profession and curatorial practice, to reposition curating within a contemporary techno-culture. As art itself and the cultural infrastructures around it remain in flux as a response to an overflow of new technologies and focus on the digital, what new ways of participation will curators take in this evolving techno-landscape? What will this come to mean for the profession and its theory? And how will this new position affect curatorial approaches to access?

These questions are only scratching the surface of what curators must consider in the broad and increasingly complex act of navigating and designing digital infrastructures as well as the social and societal factors and obstacles they present. Thus, this chapter will contain a condensed outline of audience interaction within digital exhibition structures from both online and offline positions in conjunction with evolving curatorial practice needed to accommodate such spaces and interactions. While moving briefly away from access as a specific focus, I believe that a solid understanding of the digital landscape and how curation must acclimate within it, is necessary to serve as context for how digital access can fit into these already existing virtual frameworks.

To begin, within this chapter I will often refer to the terms such as digital or virtual exhibitions and infrastructures. In this context, I define the core of this terminology as innovative and often highly interactive presentations of artistic works or constructed experiences within non-physical venues or frameworks. These types of artistic showcases are capable of a greater degree of access than traditional gallery or museum structures, “with the prospect of being constantly updated and remaining open and accessible to the public over longer periods of time.”¹²

¹¹ Terry Smith. *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, Independent Curators International, 2012.

¹² Natale, Maria Teresa and Fernandez, Sergi. And Lopez, M. *Handbook on Virtual Exhibitions and Virtual Performances*, INDICATE Project, 2012.

The emergence of portable technologies like iPhones and laptops has contributed greatly to the possibility of being always connected to digital space, literally “carrying” the internet wherever we go.¹³ This has led to a situation where users do not always perceive physical and digital spaces as entirely separate entities.¹⁴ In this sense, exhibitions housed in digital spaces are becoming not only more common but even increasingly comfortable. However, many more traditional physical gallery and exhibition curators still make the argument that the physical and digital must remain in their own realms so as not to confuse viewers. While I acknowledge this concern, I reject this argument, since as stated above, I believe it is clear that society as a whole has become and is continuing to become more than comfortable and aware of our positions within the ever-blurring lines between online and offline. Interestingly, it’s possible to observe that the rise of the curator figure as we now understand it and the evolution of the internet evolved alongside one another. Yet despite their parallels, the discourses around these two developments have remained to a large extent separate, mirroring such perspectives of curators on the physical versus digital exhibition experience.

Similarly, another apparent separation exists between online and offline curating that is particularly noticeable in the disproportionate ways curators think and respond to the issue of accessibility within physical spaces, as opposed to their digital counterparts. Indeed, there exists both a historical and disciplinary inclination for online/offline activities to be divided, while really a more synergistic approach is needed. So how to adjust to this issue as curators? I argue that a shift is necessary within curatorial thought and practice, in which curating becomes more of a networked-co-curation¹⁵ as the discipline and profession continue to be heavily influenced by “technological developments and the offline social effects these technologies initiate and embody.”¹⁶

Additionally, curators working with online technologies are presented with the challenge of how to respond to new artistic forms that involve programming: for instance program-objects that display dynamic and transformative properties, and that are distributed over socio-technological networks. Although there are many examples of social platforms and highly relevant examples of online art platforms, “these still largely operate in display mode replicating more conventional models of curating and the operations of art institutions in general.”¹⁷

¹³ de Souza e Silva, Adriana. *From Cyber to Hybrid: Mobile Technologies as Interfaces of Hybrid Spaces*, in *Space and Culture*, 2006.

¹⁴ Baglietto, Francesca. *Curating Across Interfaces: An Account of a (Hybrid) Expanding Exhibition*, Chelsea College of Arts, University of the Arts London, PhD Thesis, 2016.

¹⁵ Networked Co-curation is a term emphasizing an alliance between a curator, objects, users, and machine.

¹⁶ Dekker, Annet and Tedone, Gaia. *Networked Co-Curation: An Exploration of the Socio-Technical Specificities of Online Curation*, 2019.

¹⁷Joasia Krysa. *Software Curating: The Politics of Curating in/as (an) Open System(s)*, University of Plymouth, PhD Thesis, 2008.

By nature, digital curating is shaped and defined not merely by its content, but just as much by the nature of the structures and the systems it operates within and alongside. “Digital curation is not only concerned with presenting art, but situates itself alongside already present functions and processes within a wider ecology of social and technical relations.”¹⁸ As a result, we have reached a stage where these two entities of curator and web, can no longer afford to be so separate from one another, particularly when concerning the pressing need of the curatorial to evolve in order to address expanding forms and methods of digital interface organization.

The curatorial figure then must not remain an independent outlier from the processes they dictate and oversee, but instead embrace the natural interconnectivity perpetuated by the internet and virtual spaces. Digital curation naturally situates the curator as one of many factors of influence and mediation. Being embedded already within algorithmic infrastructures, online curation comes into contact with sets of agents and power relationships that define the contexts of such platforms not simply as commercial spaces but also as social ones, where users interact, taste is co-produced and aesthetic germination can arise. Due to this socio-technical specificity and shifting the focus from artists and artworks to processes and systems, online curation recasts the function of the curator: the curator as part of a complex network of human and technical agents, networked images, and digital objects and machines.¹⁹

In this way, it becomes necessary to adopt methods in which curators are aware of the systems they are working alongside and within, and consequently circumnavigate or even engage further with these systems. Thus, these limiting structures become instead a motivating challenge through which curatorial practice may employ such innovative concepts like accessibility as a means of enhancing connection and engagement between artist, curator, and audience. Following this ideology, “curation aims to attend not only to the artist and their work as part of conventional curatorial labor, but also to focus new energy into considering access in creative and conceptual ways that could be enlivened both practically and conceptually.”²⁰

Writer and curator Amanda Cachia argues for this method of curation, which she goes on to describe as “creative access”, an essential path forward in “cripping”²¹ artistic curating in cyberspace and the broader art world. Her definition of this term is twofold. Firstly, it emphasizes the inseparability that should exist between access and the curatorial process rather than an

¹⁸ Ibid, Introductory chapter.

¹⁹ Ibid, Introductory chapter.

²⁰ Amanda Cachia. “The Politics of Creative Access: Disability in Curatorial Practice”, in *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Accessibility*, Routledge, 2018.

²¹ The term “Crip” exists as a modern slang for the historically derogatory slur “cripple”, and is currently undergoing a process of being reclaimed by some within disabled communities. The term situates itself within larger disability and “Crip” cultures and activism, aiming to shift the word’s representation towards being a verb encompassing an urgency to “disrupt the stable, transform the familiar, and subvert the order of things, unsettle entrenched beliefs, and to make anew.” (Henner, Jon and Robinson, Octavian. *Unsettling Languages, Unruly Bodyminds: Imagining a Crip Linguistics*, 2021.)

unfortunately more traditional “checkbox” approach to access that occurs after the majority of a curator’s work has been already finished. “This taped-on approach is otherwise known as “disability accommodation,” an old-fashioned and reductive phrase that comes off as patronizing. Ironically, “disability accommodation” is meant to be a convenient and short-term arrangement, although it has historically been anything but convenient, and being “short-term” implies a lack of commitment. For exhibitions and curators alike, a disability accommodation is therefore compliance, and a minimum one at that.”²²

Secondly, “creative access” suggests ways to view access within curatorial thought and practice as a means of constructing deeper connection and wider perception of artwork, as opposed to a more historical take on access in curation as merely extra work or as distraction to from the experience for viewers.

Cachia describes one such example of creative accessibility in her curatorial work, which involves adding audio descriptions to accompany artists’ works. She illustrates how in multiple occasions, she has found that recording audio descriptions of visual works may not only serve as an important accessibility consideration for those who may be hard of hearing or have difficulty reading texts, but may even be a way to offer the artist a “richer and more complex means in which to think about their art-making process, adding new dialogical layers to a work that is predominantly visual or aural.”²³ She explains how in this way, she as the curator often invites artists she works with to participate in the audio description for their own work.

Obviously, such a task brings up a variety of questions, particularly about the ‘right’ way to execute such an element. For instance, how much description should be provided for each image or frame in a video? How does one describe something as conceptual as a specific color or emotion? What are the most important pieces of information in an image display that need to be conveyed verbally? How should the temporal aspects such work be communicated, if for instance a video is collaged and cut up in a complicated form? In many cases, these questions do not have one single answer, and, depending upon the work and form of display, may have numerous ways to consider and approach the audio accompaniment. The curator then is an essential part of this process, helping to guide the artist as they navigate these questions and arrangements. Additionally, this is a point in the curatorial process when, if possible, people within the communities for whom the audio is an essential part of the experience, should be consulted, as they will be able to provide integral perspective and suggestions when included in ongoing conversations between artist and curator.

²² Amanda Cachia. “Curating Access: Disability Art Activism and Creative Accommodation”, Routledge, 2023.

²³ Cachia, “Curating Access: Disability Art Activism and Creative Accommodation”, p. 46.

A great example that illustrates this practice in action is the work of performance and visual artist Katherine Araniello in her video piece *Sick Bitch Crip Dance*²⁴. Araniello's work challenges representations of physical disability, with this particular video depicting three dancing avatar personas. The dance music was sourced on a free website and then mixed in Garage Band. The lyrics in the sound track are used as subtitles within the video, such as "Iconic Wheelchair Bound Living Miracle" or the pulsating "S" "B" "C" in rhythm with the beat of the music. Araniello used the framework of the music video in order to convey her personal feelings about finding a certain type of mobile freedom in cyberspace, because it is there that she can effectively dance more imaginatively and without constraints.

In the case of Araniello's process of audio captioning her work, Cachia describes that while initially the artist expressed concerns about how to approach this component, through a dialogue between artist and curator, they ended up engaging in the process in a powerful and stimulating way.²⁵ The following is a text description of her lively audio captioning script for the previously mentioned video:

White text reads INFLATED EGO DREAMS OF BEING CRIPPLED. A front facing female, standing up, moves up and down and side to side in the centre of the screen. Both eyes are looking to the right and have make-up on. Block black eyebrows and block red lips. Her cheeks are blotchy white. Her hair is bright lime green, goes down to her bottom and has thick black lines. Her torso is pink and her breasts are made of light pink fur with one cigarette coming out of each breast pointing forward. Her left arm points outwards and is made of an AK47 silver gun. Her right arm and hand is large pink plastic pointing outwards. Her fingers are straight. Her left leg is a gold piston with pink font that reads BITCH. Her other leg is a green splint with straps and is attached to a high heel black boot.²⁶

This innovative approach to audio captioning for digital works illustrates the power that a creative approach in curation and artist display can have in relation to more traditional methods of access that often do not consider how to uphold an artist's character and style within their works' organization and depiction. As opposed to providing a dull audio of monotonous voices slowly describing colors and forms, this collaborative and engaging approach creates a captivating experience and new perspective on the work to provide audience members numerous routes through which to confront and become part of an art piece.

²⁴ Katherine Araniello, *Sick Bitch Crip Dance*, music video, 2013.

²⁵ Cachia notes that she also provided her artists with several helpful examples and templates for audio captioning, such as the exhibitions in <http://www.blindatthemuseum.com> and industry standards like Art Beyond Sight in New York City: <http://www.artbeyondsight.org/handbook/acs-verbalsamples.shtml>

²⁶ Katherine Araniello, transcript of audio description, in *Sick Bitch Crip Dance*, music video, 2013.

Another interesting project is Art Et Al. an inclusive curatorial and international art platform highlighting neurodivergent, and intellectually/learning disabled arts practices. The platform commissions and presents collaborations between artists from supported studios, artist peers, and artist professionals. These projects include exhibitions, videos, interviews, events, and even exploration of international museum and public art collections. Their aim is to evaluate adverse voices and creative practices in order to create an open diverse, and inclusive contemporary art world.²⁷ Founded in late 2020 by a collective of UK/Australian based individuals and organizations passionate about inclusive curating, the platform is an ongoing initiative releasing new content monthly in a range from peer-to-peer collaborative exhibitions to artist talks.

The Art Et Al. website launched with a refreshing array of accessibility measures in place. These include YouAccess widget allowing for a change in text size, color, and form; downloadable Easy Reads for a simple language attentive to texts and essays, BSL (British Sign Language) interpretations, and FAQ's to assist in explaining any language that might be difficult to understand. Additionally, each page section is accompanied by an audio translation clip in which it is possible to hear whatever text is in the section read aloud, and all video include necessary captioning capabilities.²⁸

Shape Arts, another virtual platform and evolving exhibition space based in the UK, is a disability-led arts organization working to improve access to culture for disabled people by providing opportunities for disabled artists, training cultural institutions to be more open to disabled people, and running participatory arts and development programs.²⁹ Similarly to the Art Et Al. interface, the web platform of the organization employs an array of digital accessibility features, aiming to help users not only navigate the intricacies of the site, but also to have alternative options to interact with and view artists' works and resources.

Since 2020, many of Shape Arts' exhibitions have taken place virtually, or involving virtual components, so that viewers may peruse artist work from their own homes if not able to make it into the galleries. One such exhibition is *In the Mirror*³⁰, which ran during summer 2022 but now remains ongoing as a beautifully curated webpage, where works are depicted in numerous forms, from images of physical sculptures and paintings, to audiovisual pieces, to 3D

²⁷ Art Et Al. artetal.org.

²⁸ *Launch of Art Et Al. - e-Flux Agenda*. 2021, <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/397381/launch-of-art-et-al/>.

²⁹ Shape Arts. shapearts.org.uk.

³⁰ *In the Mirror*, virtual exhibition webpage, Shape Arts UK, 2022. <https://inthemirror.me/>.

environments. This exhibition uses Able Player³¹, an accessible cross-platform media player that allows different versions of the same content to be accessed from the same place. Viewers can scroll through to explore the work of the 25 artists who participated, with each artist page accompanied by options to have works and texts described visually in BSL, read aloud blog with text in an audio description, and with all images and videos accompanied by simplified alt-text. Navigation of the site is simple and efficient, and while each sub-page includes an array of boxes, video/audio links, and text alternatives, the organization and layout allow for the bulk of information to remain, clear, intuitive, and within the chosen aesthetic of the overall site, while also not taking away from the viewing of each work. There is even an option to take an audio guided tour of the entire exhibition, which is available for free access on the organization's Soundcloud. Along the way, additional notices and explanations around the site remain present, such as flash warnings for portions of videos.

It is apparent that models of accessible web curation such as these, while still not fully commonplace particularly within arts platforms, are entirely possible to initiate. What is more, the benefits of such considerations by the curators and their collaborators ensure that all work is accessible in a streamlined and aesthetic way, so that the topics and artists displayed may have their voices and ideas accessed by whomever may be interested and in whatever way may suit them best.

In today's artistic landscape, it is clear that virtual spaces serve a greater purpose than simply a digital reflection of brick-and-mortar galleries and display spaces. Cyberspace and technologies not only create a new space in which to participate in art practices and create frameworks that can dismantle and rupture previous binaries or polarities present in physical locations, but also allows for a place where through time and practice, gaps between artist, curator, and audience may be filled.

Though the redefinition of what the curatorial figure entails and represents in the context of a rapidly digitized landscape, it may be possible to more efficiently navigate these new environments along with the technologies behind and around them, as well as to allow for the diverse creative approaches necessary to make them inclusive and innovative. To further address these changes to curatorial praxis caused by technical influences and systems and to prioritize access within the process, a shift is needed within curatorial discourse from the field of art to networked cultures, entailing a radical rethinking of connection and collaboration between

³¹ Able Player is a free, open-source, and fully accessible cross-browser HTML5 media player. Created by University of Washington student Terrill Thompson, it was designed as a means to offer webpage designers a wide range of accessibility features, including captions, interactive transcripts, multiple approaches to audio description, keyboard navigation, and adjustable playback rates. Able Player supports more than a dozen languages and offers multiple ways for users with various expertise to contribute to the project. (<https://journals.ala.org/index.php/ltr/article/view/7530/10398>).

curators, artists, society, audiences, and technological structures and interfaces. Essentially, “to ‘crip’ the institution requires the curatorial work of multiple people— it is not a job for one person alone.”³²

³² Villarías, Maite Barrera. *Incarnate Experiences: Learning to Curate Exhibitions for Disabled Bodies*, in *Curating Access: Disability Art Activism and Creative Accommodation* ed. Cachia, Amanda, 2023.

Chapter III

THE IMPACT OF DESIGN AND BIAS ON ACCESS

Assessing Aspects of Inclusive and Exclusive Technology and Design

When approaching the conversation of curating alongside and within technological structures such as virtual platforms and interfaces and across various devices, an important area of consideration is the initial design of these technologies and systems.

Unfortunately in many cases, design is often much more likely to be a source of exclusion than inclusion. “When we design for other people, our own biases and preferences often lead the way.”³³ In the context of the information society, terms such as digital exclusion, digital divide or digital inequality have been used to describe this exclusion from technology, e-services, and digital arenas, which should be capable of providing a wide range of participation and benefits in the lives of individuals³⁴. Generally speaking, web platforms and the pieces of technology we view them on are disproportionately skewed in their design and formats to accommodate the use and needs an identified target consumer who fits an able-bodied and neuro-typical norm.

This digital bias not only excludes a massive portion of the population of tech and internet users who do have physical or mental disabilities, but perpetuates a harmful narrative that disability is an individual’s problem, rather than a failure of designers and social organizers to prioritize accessibility. This “othering” of those with disabilities by digital spaces and tools serves to reinforce digital barriers and greatly influence the ability of these individuals to participate in greater society by preventing various methods necessary for successful communication, harming chances to partake in digital help and information resources, and decreasing chances of attaining work via web-based applications and research.

There are already a number of established writings and discourses around the nature of relationships between curating and algorithms. Curator and researcher Gaia Tedone argues in her essay *Human-Algorithmic Curation* that both curators and algorithms are key organizational nodes in cultural systems³⁵ with an acknowledgement their growing interdependence in everyday socio-technical systems. Tedone’s analysis aims to illustrate false dichotomies of working either with or against the algorithm, and instead suggests that a “critically reflexive approach is needed in order to address the crisis of cultural value brought about by the

³³ Gilbert, *pg. 102*.

³⁴ Kaarakainen, Meri-Tuula & Saikkonenm Loretta. *Remarks on digital accessibility: educational disparities define digital inclusion from adolescence onwards* in *Universal Access in the Information Society*, 2022

³⁵ Nagler and del Pesco, *Curating in the Time of Algorithms*, 2011, cited in *Human-Algorithmic Curation: Curating with or against the Algorithm? Conference on Computation, Communication, Aesthetics*, 2019.

algorithmic world and for envisioning new types of strategic alliances between humans and machines."³⁶

Thus, as we approach an understanding of the intricacies of increasingly unavoidable human-technological relationships particularly within the artistic landscape, it becomes necessary to remain critical of our technology's designs, functions, and outcomes, so as to ensure an ongoing awareness into its potential limitations.

Curator and founder Marnie Benney of aiartists.org, one of the largest communities of artists exploring and working in AI, speaks out regarding this exact subject. As an independent curator whose work investigates the societal, cultural and future implications of technology through contemporary art, Benney argues that a wide variety of experiences and perspectives are essential for understanding how humans are entering the age of intelligent machines. Contemporary technology, despite aspects of its appearance, is far from an autonomous entity. From personal positions of code creators to data sources to image training systems, there are countless factors at play which may manifest in technological bias within any given mechanism or interface. Thus, Benney emphasizes why it is so important to promote diversity and inclusion as curators and technologists.³⁷

Historically, our technology is prone to reflect social narratives of biases towards marginalized groups. This is evident in how little disability factors into the design of much of our day to day technology, such as phones, computers, web pages, AI generators, and more. Such limiting ableist biases, when coupled with an already divisive attitude towards accessibility measures particularly in digital spaces, allow such systems to be too often used in ways that serve the interests of those who already possess structural power, at the expense of those who don't. In the simplest terms, those who have borne discrimination in the past are most at risk of harm from biased and exclusionary technology in the present.

In 2019, the AI Now Institute at New York University held a gathering of disability scholars, AI developers, and computer science and human-computer interaction researchers to discuss the intersection of disability, bias, and AI, and to identify areas where more research and intervention are needed. Through much discussion and debate, the group aimed to identify key

³⁶ Gaia Tedone. *Human-Algorithmic Curation: Curating with or against the Algorithm?*, Conference on Computation, Communication, Aesthetics, 2019.

³⁷ Barbara Gruber, *How artists are hacking bias in algorithms*, Goethe Institut, <https://www.goethe.de/prj/k40/en/kun/aia.html>

questions that a focus on disability raises for the project of understanding the social implications of AI, and to ensure that technologies don't reproduce and extend histories of marginalization.³⁸

The report published as a result of this project highlights numerous important questions. For example, what standards of “normal” and “ability” are produced and enforced by specific digital systems, and what are the costs of being understood as an “outlier”? What tactics can those working toward AI accountability learn from the disability rights movement, such as identifying architectural and structural bias across physical and digital spaces? And what kinds of design, research, and digital engineering practices could produce more desirable futures for disabled people?³⁹

Firstly, it is worth noting that much of the AI and digital systems targeted at disabled people implicitly promises to make them more like non-disabled people, based on an implied understanding that non-disabled is the norm. For instance, the AI-enabled app *Ava* promises to allow Deaf people to take part in spoken conversations. Those engaged in the conversation open the app on their phones, and *Ava* converts spoken word into text, allowing people to follow along. *Ava*'s premise is that deafness is a hindrance to communication. But, as disability activist and scholar Eli Clare points out, many deaf people claim themselves not as disabled, but as a linguistic minority. They locate the trouble they experience not in their inability to hear but in the non-deaf world's unwillingness to learn and use sign language. Thus, the Deaf community doesn't universally welcome technologies that “bring with them the non-deaf world's hope of eradicating both deafness as a medical condition and being Deaf as an identity.⁴⁰ In cases such as this, disability is being illustrated in ways that make it implicitly understood to be undesirable, with technology positioned as “solving the ‘problem’” of disability.⁴¹

As a result of this understood position centering disability in discussions of algorithmic an design bias and justice can help us refocus and refine our approach to remediating our machines' harms, moving away from a narrow focus on technology and its potential to “solve” and “assist,” and toward approaches that account for social context, history, and the power structures within which these algorithms are produced and deployed.⁴²

³⁸ Mara Mills & Meredith Whittaker. *Disability, Bias, and AI.*, AI Now Institute Report, 2019. <https://ainowinstitute.org/disabilitybiasai-2019.pdf>

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Eli Clare. *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling With Cure*, Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2017.

⁴¹ Alison Kafer. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Indiana University Press, 2013.

⁴² Mara Mills & Meredith Whittaker. *Disability, Bias, and AI.*

So how can those who are harmed by these systems contest the harmful determinations made about them? And how do we move from “inclusion” to “agency and control” given the increasingly proprietary nature of the technologies being created and the centralization inherent in current algorithms and code? The answers to these questions and more are not simple, and they will not come only from innovative engineering or through tweaking data and algorithms. These biases imply a need for approaches that go well beyond merely the technical, and that focus on equality and justice, recognizing such issues raised by our rapidly evolving cooperation and integration of technology as also being social and political.

As the formation of the curatorial figure has evolved alongside algorithms, we can observe how both take up roles of cultural and visibility gatekeepers as they operate through mechanisms of altering and selection. These gatekeeping mechanisms, if not attentively recognized and monitored, could be amplified through their cooperation. Therefore, as such collaboration between curator and machine become more commonplace, it is necessary to ensure that their alliances be based upon critical awarenesses of both algorithmic and curatorial processes involved, particularly if each participant’s potential biases and altering mechanisms remain as unavoidable components.

Experiments in the field of human and algorithmic curation offer the opportunity to implement a mode of processual criticism that is reflexive, playful, and creative,⁴³ whilst also bringing to the public attention urgent debates concerning the wider implications algorithms have on society and the increasing interdependence between humans and machines in every-day life.⁴⁴ Additionally, in order to tackle the core issues that the rapid proliferation of algorithmic systems raises, the communities currently examining such techno-biases cannot simply adopt the ideas and language of disability studies and activism. Disabled people, along with other affected communities, must be at the center of any approach, defining the terms of engagement, the priorities of the debate, highlighting particularly harmful or perhaps less noticeable biases and their effects, and “retelling the story of technological design from the perspective of those who fall outside of its version of ‘normal.’”⁴⁵

⁴³ Edward Finn. *What Algorithms Want: Imagination in the Age of Computing*, The MIT Press, 2017.

⁴⁴ Gaia Tedone. *Human-Algorithmic Curation: Curating with or against the Algorithm?*, p. 137

⁴⁵ Mara Mills & Meredith Whittaker. *Disability, Bias, and AI*.

Chapter IV

THE SOCIOLOGY OF ACCESS

Confronting Social and Societal Impacts of Digital Inclusion and Exclusion

Shifting from an emphasis on the artistic world alone to a wider sociologically-based perspective, it may be observed the ways in which incorporation of digital counterparts to physical spaces possess immense power. Not only by increasing inclusion and access for disabled individuals, but allowing these individuals to achieve greater levels of independence, engagement and participation within the art world and beyond. By understanding the social effects of inclusive web and other digital spaces, it may be better understood the urgency to incorporate an awareness of disability access into the design and curation of such spaces. This chapter outlines various topics under disability sociology — from avatar use to case studies of virtual/physical interactive exhibitions — in order to provide an overview of current sociological discourses surrounding access that may be of use for a curator centering their practices in accessibility and inclusion.

For a bit of background, disability studies or disability sociology emerged relatively recently as a highly interdisciplinary subfield of sociology and has seen growing institutionalization within the field. Generally speaking, the field of disability studies is one of critical inquiry, centering the lived experiences of disabled people without value judgements about quality of life, and works to elevate disabled voices. Disability, through this lens, is a socially-constructed system, which comprises of people whose bodyminds do not—or are perceived to not—exist and/or behave according to societal norms. Under this umbrella of study are critical disability studies and crip theory. Both of these are concerned with exploring the experience of disability, acknowledging the history of exclusion of the disability community and other social barriers related to disability, as well as considering intersections with topics such as gender, sexuality, social justice, medical humanities, and universal design.

An important component within disability studies involves the consideration of ways in which the internet and digital technologies are used by those with disabilities and the broader social and even psychological effects of both successful and unsuccessful aspects of digital inclusion by these groups. As cyberspace has certainly revolutionized the lived experience of disability, it becomes necessary to situate these individuals' specific experiences within a broader context of digital sociology.⁴⁶ In this way, it becomes possible to have a more accurate picture of how digital media use contributes to patterns of human behavior, social relationships, and concepts of the self. This research is also imperative to support ongoing efforts towards

⁴⁶ Digital sociology is a branch of sociology exploring the disparities in access to new technologies, and the role of technology in a wide variety of important areas, such as the exercise of power, the sometimes unforeseen influence of social media, the nature of work, gender inequalities, and so on. <https://der.monash.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/What-is-digital-sociology.pdf>

digital inclusion within these spaces, so they may be better modified in order to aid in the increase of accessibility in web-based and virtual technology design.

The internet has the potential to be a great mechanism for disability inclusion. The ability to communicate and participate in activities in real time anywhere in the world without leaving home opens up enormous new avenues of participation for people with the entire range of physical, sensory, and cognitive disabilities. “Physical barriers, transportation challenges, communication difficulties, and other major barriers to participation can be overcome through an accessible Internet that creates wide new vistas for civic engagement, education, employment, and social interaction.”⁴⁷

For those with disabilities, full access to the digital elements of these spaces plays an essential role in social participation and forging connection. For example, people who might never encounter someone with a similar disability in their physical environment can now interact directly with people with similar conditions worldwide. For people whose disabilities limit their ability to leave their homes, the Internet has the potential to provide a far greater world of interaction. Additionally, the option of online learning and fully remote jobs provides an opportunity for many individuals to achieve a level of independence in their professions and lives who may otherwise have struggled in more traditional environments.

Individuals with disabilities even have the option to choose to live their online lives as people without disabilities. Studies into the use of digital avatars use for people with disabilities is ongoing, but those within ability communities who have written on it describe that using this sort of ‘avatar’ experience as navigation within digital spaces in a variety of strategic ways: as a means to signal and disclose current abilities, access needs, and to raise awareness. Some underscore again how avatars may be a more accessible way to communicate than other alternatives. Generally, avatars and accessible navigation of virtual space offers a great support in disability identity representation, mainly due to the possibility for an easily customizable format that is not strictly tied to reality. Thus, another point is made for the importance of a social awareness by web designers and virtual space curators to ensure that platforms allowing such an experience can handle and actively support this experience for those who value it most.

Numerous projects have merged exploring such issues of accessibility within various digital scenarios, and what offline impacts these interactions are likely to produce. Returning to a brief case study mentioned earlier, artist Kristin Aramillio describes her connection as a disabled individual to digital space. She notes a certain type of mobile freedom in cyberspace, as it is

⁴⁷ Jaeger, Paul. *Disability and the Internet: Confronting a Digital Divide*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012.

there that she can effectively move more imaginatively and without the constraints she faces in the physical world. She describes that “in cyberspace there are no physical barriers, therefore representation of disability creates a new refreshing discourse, i.e. a wheelchair can fly and movement is different.”⁴⁸ While the characters in her aforementioned video *Sick Bitch Crip Dance* look disabled and are disabled, they actually move around in a unique way, and the music video platform within this virtual realm gives them this freedom to be unusually mobile.⁴⁹

Artist Cassandra Hartblay further explores this online/offline dichotomy in her piece *Do You like this Installation?*, an interactive art project that spans both online and material space. The project is comprised of three parts: an installation in a physical gallery, an interactive online interface, and a final data analysis. Situating herself as an ethnographer of disability experience⁵⁰, the project was born from her research into inaccessible and accessible places in her home city in Russia as well as an interest into the differences of voting in real time and online. Her project thus aims to observe access and inclusivity throughout both the digital and physical spaces in which she undertook her research, “posting questions around control, access, mobility and technology that continue to circulate within this complex, layered installation that crosses over both the physical and virtual spheres.”⁵¹

The material portion of the installation consisted of numerous sizes and versions of ramps, seats, ladders, and pedestals, reminiscent of the accessible and inaccessible spacial elements she encountered in Russia. The pieces were accompanied by voting boxes places throughout and around the installation pieces, prompting viewers to check YES or NO and thus vote to decide if they liked the exhibition. Access to the boxes as designed to be intentionally both difficult and easy depending on if the visitor is disabled or non-disabled, triggering different levels of frustration and anxiety, and the arrangement was changed every couple of days so as to observe different methods of exchange between viewers and the work.⁵²

An additional component included a form of discreet/indiscreet surveillance in the gallery space, where viewers could observe how people interacted with the objects in the installation. This surveillance was accessible as well via a livestream, bridging the physical/digital barrier into the second part of the installation: a website that users were prompted to navigate to from the physical gallery as an alternative space through which to cast their vote on the installation.

⁴⁸ Katherine Araniello, interview with curator Amanda Cachia in “Disabling’ the Museum: Curator as Infrastructural Activist”, 2013.

⁴⁹ Amanda Cachia. “Disabling’ the Museum: Curator as Infrastructural Activist”, Canadian Disability Studies Association, 2013.

⁵⁰ Cassandra Hartblay, interview with Amanda Cachia, in “Disabling’ the Museum: Curator as Infrastructural Activist”, 2013.

⁵¹ Ibid, 18.

⁵² Ibid, 14.

Hartblay aimed to prompt viewers to consider then if voting online might be more accessible than voting in the material installation, especially in the case of those of those who would not visit the physical site of the gallery and then must rely on the virtual realm instead to vote.

Ultimately, *Do You like this Installation?* provides an interesting situation in which to observe if and how online interfaces might be more enabling than physical space and if the ease for design and re-design in both spaces changes depending on one's embodiment and one's access to technology. Hartblay questions what crip perspectives tell us about the politics of participation, understood as disabled and non-disabled movement in and between the physical and virtual worlds.

While works such as Hartblay's can successfully illustrate how virtual space may give an artist, curator and audience the opportunity to design, question and destabilize power and control in the real world, especially as it relates to disability, cyberspace does not eradicate it. In reality, these interfaces simply allow for a re-distribution of power and control in other ways, with some being more effective than others. Works within these contexts allow individuals and communities opportunity to take back control and agency to share not only their disability politics but also how cyberspace and technology help them express it uniquely and definitively.⁵³

As artistic works face the opportunity to cover both on and offline fields, "digital interfaces offer a broader and more diverse pedagogical, ontological, epistemological and phenomenological horoscope of disability engagement that continues to propel disability studies, curatorial and artistic practice into the future."⁵⁴ An awareness of the social interconnectivity between digital and physical space such as that depicted in Hartblay's project, illustrates the importance of giving the same curatorial attention and care to digital space inclusivity as is more commonly given to the physical. The impacts that online and offline spaces have on all individuals are not mutually exclusive to their respective realms. Often times, these places serve as reflections of one another, where inequalities in one are indicative of those in the other.

Current and ongoing disability sociological research and crip theory emphasizes how populations of disabled individuals in society face gaps in access and use, perpetuated by socially imposed differences created by technology design and a lack of enforced law and policy. As curation evolves towards an increasingly collaborative and trans-disciplinary practical and theoretical framework, awareness and implementation of the extensive societal impact of an inclusive digital artistic landscape become an essential component of consideration.

⁵³ Ibid, 28.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 36.

Chapter V

APPLICABLE PRACTICES FOR CURATORS AND ARTISTS

Beginning Education and Learning Resources for Implementing Creative Accessibility

When I began research into the topic of accessibility, I was working primarily as a visual artist and emerging curator. Situated within a photography department at the center of a film and television school focused on contemporary visual studies, I was shocked that I had never once come across discussions around access. In fact, over the three year duration of my studies, no one ever mentioned anything regarding how we as young creatives ready to enter the artistic landscape might consider the inclusivity of our works or the navigability of our exhibitions. From one perspective, this may not be surprising, especially considering that the entirety of my department from peers to faculty was seemingly made up of able bodied individuals and remained so throughout my time in the school. Over time, I began to understand that this lack of discourse around access was not in any way due to malice or disinterest, but mostly due to the simple fact that no one felt they had a personal connection to the topic, and therefore no one really had much knowledge or background in it. Engagement in such issues for many of my peers was simply not something they had ever considered to be important, and many of them, even if curious, had no clue where to begin.

As someone who has had to move into these fields of research from a background of relatively no previous knowledge, I understand firsthand how daunting it can be to approach such wide and evolving discourses, and furthermore, to figure out how to empathize with these issues as a start towards eventually learning how best to approach accessibility in ways that work best for artist, curator, and of course, audience. Therefore, I decided that, considering the nature of responses I received towards my choice of this topic, I wanted to be sure to include a portion of this work that I could share with my colleagues within the art world. This chapter outlines some basic practices of digital creative accessibility to consider in the making of art installations, curatorial projects, and even digital presence, as well as provide resources for individual further learning.

We, as the next generation of artists and creators, have a responsibility to uphold. It is up to us to form an awareness of the shortcomings of our predecessors, and to progress towards a future of diversity, inclusion, critical theory, discussion, and cooperation. As we move into becoming the new framework for arts and culture, this task, though daunting, should prompt an equal amount of excitement. If we work to overcome stagnant inequalities of our past. We have great power to enact real change, noticeable across countless creative disciplines.

Alternative Text

For schools, art institutions, and independent creative viewership, online promotion is essential. Regardless of the extent of digital presence, there are still accessibility measures that should be used. Alt text on social media posts, is a very simple yet important addition to increase the navigability and inclusion of something as basic as an Instagram post, Facebook event, or monthly newsletter. Alt text can be approached like a tweet; describe in a couple simple sentences a visual overview of images and their layout. A fantastic sample for reference is the Instagram page of organization and gallery space Wellcome Collection.⁵⁵

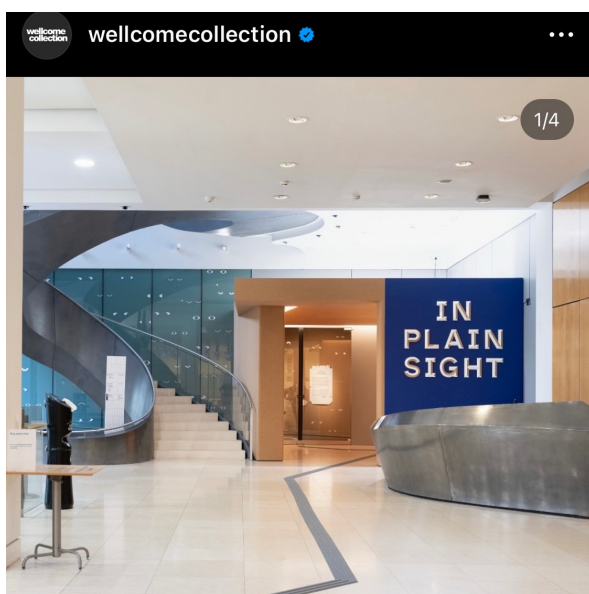


Fig. 1 Image carousel post for recent exhibition *In Plain Sight*, Wellcome Collection gallery, London 2023

[Alt text: A carousel of photos all of *In Plain Sight*, focussing on elements of the exhibition that made it more accessible to those who are visually impaired.

Image 1: A photo of the lobby and the ground-floor gallery space. There is a raised line guiding blind and partially sighted visitors from the steps leading up to the museum towards *In Plain Sight*.

Image 2: A photo of the accessibility guides that line the wall of the entrance leading to the gallery. There are instructions on how to access the British Sign Language guides and Audio Descriptions, alongside shelves where visitors can pick up the gallery guides in large print and Braille.

Image 3: A photo of one of the first artworks featured in the exhibition, 'Mati Armour'. A tactile garment made by Alexandra Zsigmond featuring 400 copper plaques each engraved with a different stylised eye that people can touch and feel.

Fig. 2 Accompanying alt text descriptions of each image in post, Wellcome Collection gallery, London 2023

The benefits of alt text are multifaceted. Truly a reflection of the 'creative' aspect of creative access, not only does this small action normalize and promote inclusive ways for anyone to interact with visual content, but it can serve as a helpful exercise for artists, curators, and all creatives. A great tool for practicing descriptive wording and observation, this tool is something easy to implement yet extremely important as a beginning push into consistent accessibility consideration and inclusive practice application.

⁵⁵ Wellcome Collection is a free museum and library in central London connecting science, medicine, life and art. Through exhibitions, collections, live programming, digital, broadcast and publishing, they aim to create opportunities for people to think deeply about the connections between science, medicine, life and art. Wellcome supports discovery research into life, health and wellbeing, and is taking on three worldwide health challenges: mental health, infectious disease and climate. <https://wellcomecollection.org/about-us>

Transcripts and captions for audio and video content

It might seem hard to forget, but many platforms, pages, and digital environments do not offer proper captioning for audiovisual content or written transcripts for sound. This can take on a variety of different forms. In some cases it may be easiest to have simple text captions, but other options include ASL/BSL transcriptions or audio of text being read, both of which are demonstrated in the examples below. While some platforms such as Youtube allow for elements such as automatic captions, often these translations may be messy or require some tweaking in order to be better understandable and simple. Captioning and transcripts must not be left until the last moment and can be considered an interesting and creative way to engage with the audience to better meet their needs, while allowing new routes for artists to explore connection to their works.

Something different.

excerpt of 'Something Different' by Monica Lazzari from e-catalogue

People respond to work they like, but then sometimes I look at a piece I don't like and try and find something I like about it. It's a journey I take, you know, I didn't like it at the start and now I like it. But then sometimes you can't get it — you can't fake it you know. Sometimes, when I was working on this, I was confused about why I selected something. Then I'd go for a walk, come back to it, and go 'oh yeah, I get it now. Yeah, I get what I was doing. I'm not so confused about it anymore.' I thought about the themes for this exhibition hard. I thought about what looks good as an image online.

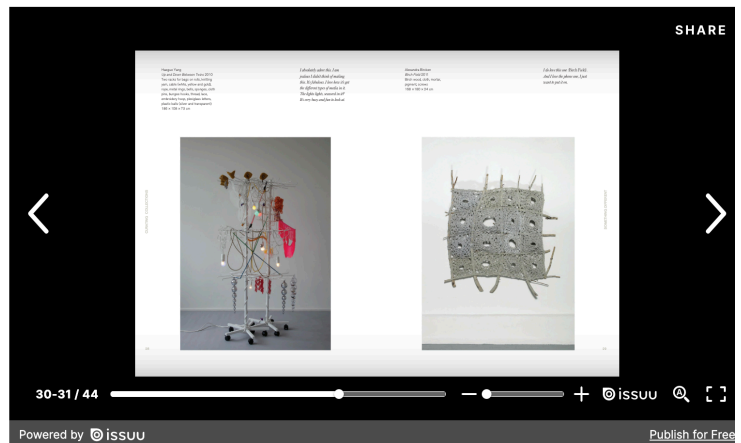


Fig. 1 Audio description accompanying visual catalog for *Something Different* exhibition, Art Et Al, 2022.



Fig. 2 BSL transcription of written artists statement in *Into the Mirror* exhibition, ShapeArts, 2023.



Fig. 3 Captioning for video voice over, *Call Me By Your DWP Number*, Babeworld and Whinegums, 2019.

Simplified text and text design

Text considerations apply to both physical and digital works. If artwork or exhibitions are accompanied by complicated or very academic texts and explanations, it is worth adding a simplified text version. This can aid, for example, neuro-diverse viewers who have difficulties reading long texts or trouble focusing. A simple text does not have to mean that a text loses its meaning, but can be considered more of an outline, using elements such as shorter sentences and less complex terminology.

The design of text, both physically and digitally, is also an important consideration. The color, font, size, and spacing can all impact readability, particularly for those with low vision or who require the help of screen-reading technology. Very light colors on equally light backgrounds should be avoided, as should the opposite of dark text on a dark background. Fonts that are very small without much spacing between words and lines may also cause difficulty, and fonts that are particularly warped or cursive-like may not be compatible with screen readers and can pose issues for those who are low vision. A commonly used font style is sans-serif or serif fonts, known for their design appeal but also readability.

FONT RECCOMENDATIONS: ⁵⁶

Highly recommended fonts:

- Verdana (sans serif)—used by many accessibility sites
- Arial (sans serif)
- Georgia (serif)
- Lucida Sans (sans serif—Windows)
- Lucida Grande (sans serif—Mac)
- Book Antiqua (serif)
- Helvetica (sans serif)

Other acceptable accessible fonts:

(Accessible and acceptable to use, but may be slightly less readable, legible, and/or available for some users.)

- Andika (sans serif)—great for print disabilities; free download available
- Calibri (sans serif)
- Times New Roman

⁵⁶ *Making Design Accessible: Fonts, Color Contrast, and Alt Text*, Accessibility Resources at UNCG, 2019. <https://accessibility.uncg.edu/getting-started-with-accessibility/accessible-design/>

Learning from those within disability communities

In the preface to this thesis I mentioned the slogan “Nothing about us without us”. This mantra for disability rights holds true within the context of this work. While research and writing around curation and inclusivity for disabled people is easily searchable, I maintain that the best kinds of inputs and suggestions always come from those within disability and disability arts communities. These are the people who live these topics beyond the writing of a paper. Their opinions and ideas must always be included in our works, in our arts exhibitions, and in our discussions. Therefore, I included several disability-led organizations and projects that I found to be helpful in my own learning and unlearning around topics of inclusive curation and digital accessibility.

Projects, platforms, organizations

- [Disability Visibility](#)
An online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture.⁵⁷
- [Tangled Arts and Disability](#)
A disability-led arts gallery and non-profit aiming to support disabled artists, cultivate disability arts in Canada, and to increase opportunities for everyone to participate in arts.⁵⁸
- [Disability Arts Online](#)
Disability-led organization and journal aiming to advance disability arts and culture. They support disabled artists and spread the word about fantastic art being produced by artists within the sector.⁵⁹

Podcasts

- *Be My Eyes Podcast*
Interviews of people with different spectrums of blindness. They talk candidly about their path to independence, joke about some frustrations of their built environment, and unravel how sighted people can become great allies.⁶⁰
- *The Neurodivergent Woman*
Psychologists and neuropsychologists discuss different types of neurodiversity through the lens of their professions.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Disability Visibility, <https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/>

⁵⁸ Tangled Arts and Disability, <https://tangledarts.org/>

⁵⁹ Disability Arts Online, <https://disabilityarts.online/about/>

⁶⁰ Will Butler, *Be My Eyes*, <https://open.spotify.com/show/2cOIMwY65KCnVYaShmvj6g>

⁶¹ Monique Mitchelson & Michelle Livock. *The Neurodivergent Woman*, <https://www.ndwomanpod.com/>

Further learning and helpful resources

NeON Digital Arts⁶², a charitable organization aiming to advance the understanding and accessibility of digital and technology-driven art forms, created a helpful list of resources for further research and practical suggestions on digital access and the arts. The following are a condensed selection of this database for future accessibility incorporation to a variety of forms of art exhibitions:

Making Digital Art Accessible

- [Digital Creatively Embedded Access - Birds of Paradise Theatre Company](#)
- [How AI could increase art world accessibility for disabled artists | Dazed](#)
- [Making your show accessible | Edinburgh Festival Fringe](#)
- [Painting a Picture of Accessible Digital Art](#)
- [The Fringe Guide to Adapting Events for Deaf and Disabled Audiences](#)
- [Using digital to make the arts more accessible | Nesta](#)
- [What does “Arts Accessibility” even mean? | Shawna NM Barnes](#)

Accessibility Professionals

- [Association of Sign Language Interpreters website](#)
- [The Association of Speech-To-Text Reporters](#)
- [National Registers of Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deafblind People \(NRCPD\)](#)

Adding Audio Descriptions

- [Audio description | Edinburgh Festival Fringe](#)
- [The Ultimate Guide to Audio Description - 3Play Media](#)

Alternative text information

- [Alt-text decision tree](#)
- [Harvard University Digital Accessibility site](#)

Adding Braille

- [Braille - A2i Transcription Services](#)
- [A2i Transcription Services Price Guide](#)

⁶² NEON Digital Arts SCIO, NEON Accessibility Strategy, <https://neondigitalarts.com/accessibility-strategy/>.

Sign Languages

- [Interpreter Fee Guidance](#)

PDF Accessibility

- [Create and verify PDF Accessibility](#)

Captioning

- [Captioning Style Guide from Talking Type Captions](#)
- [Live Closed-Captioning on Vimeo](#)
- [Streamtext](#)

Web Accessibility

- [Automated Tools for Testing Accessibility](#)
- [How can I make my digital work more inclusive?](#)
- [Overlay Factsheet](#)
- [Web Accessibility Initiative](#)

CONCLUSION

Digital environments have firmly established a new trajectory in curating, where online exhibitions have become 'open source' and allow for the public, users, and participants to interact with these curated spaces in highly sophisticated ways. The core of this thesis rests in the belief that these digital interfaces offer a diverse and interdisciplinary array of approaches to disability engagement that continue to propel disability studies, curatorial and artistic practice into the future.

By incorporating discursive programming, access as a creative methodology, and a sustained engagement with the ethics and practicalities of curating disability-related subject matter, the possibilities that virtual platforms have to offer curators are great, and show exciting potential for a future of cultural mediators to pave critical space for disabled individuals in an otherwise exclusionary and monitored space.⁶³ Moving beyond accessibility programs that act as inequivalent extensions of art made for an able audience, approaches to curation by collaborative, interdisciplinary, and informed creatives will cultivate a more equitable and inclusive art world where the disabled experience is fully accounted for.⁶⁴

Spaces and experiences situated within virtuality are not intended to replace or replicate those of their physical counterparts. While replication may be one aspect of a larger goal to recreate experiences for those not able to present, as is the case for many such projects aimed at greater accessibility, this is far from the only intent of such systems. These environments can enable individuals with disabilities to connect with and form communities and support networks, access important informative and helpful resources, and provide alternative interaction for spaces which may otherwise remain unreachable due to physical restrictions.

As our artistic landscape experiences a shift resulting from continuously integrated technological and human interference, so must those within creative disciplines and artistic display as well. In art environments existing at the center of various interdisciplinary intersections, it only makes sense that the model of curatorial practices alter accordingly. The future calls for curatorial models that prioritize inclusivity and access are networked and collaborative in nature, and span versatile branches of knowledge.

The role of the curator will continue to evolve in and around the technologies and society they may interact with. Therefore, curation must continue to be critical of itself and the surrounding artistic landscape, particularly in the case of achieving greater accessibility within

⁶³ Ibid, 46

⁶⁴ Sylvestre in Cachia, p. 85

artistic fields. Curators must ask and listen to audiences, artists, and communities. Curators must become actively cognizant of social and technological biases and practice ways of ensuring such biases are not sustained. Curators must know when and how to ask for input from others, and to work collaboratively and respectfully with those who can offer important insights into topics and lived experiences that may not be common understanding yet. And curators must accept that this role requires an ongoing path of learning and unlearning. This path will not be neat or simple, but for those passionate enough to strive for a future art world that is more diverse, more inclusive, and more collaborative, this is the only path worth taking.

As is stated excellently by curator and writer Simon Sheikh, “an exhibition must imagine a public in order to produce it, and to produce a world around it – a horizon. It is imperative we curate and exhibit with the individuals who make up our audiences in mind, and more specifically, work to understand the needs these individuals must have met in order to access these experiences as equally and fruitfully as possible”⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Simon Sheikh. *Constitutive Effects: the Techniques of the Curator*, In *Curating Subjects* ed. by Paul O'Neill, Amsterdam: de Appel & Open Editions, 2007.

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ANNEXES / ADDITIONAL OBJECTS

Fig. 1 *In Plain Sight*, Wellcome Collection gallery exhibition, London 2023.

Fig. 2 Accompanying alt text descriptions of images in post, Wellcome Collection gallery Instagram page, London 2023

Fig. 3 Audio description accompanying visual catalog for *Something Different* exhibition, Art Et AI, 2022.

Fig. 4 BSL transcription of written artists statement in *Into the Mirror* exhibition, ShapeArts, 2023.

Fig. 5 Captioning for video voice over, *Call Me By Your DWP Number*, Babeworld and Whinegums, 2019.