

invitation & barrier

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Preface

At an initial curatorial meeting for *Letters for the Future*, an exhibition by Department of Transformation (DOT), I contributed a “Note on Exhibition Design” for both the DOT team and the Curator of Brooklyn Public Library (BPL):

“Access as praxis and an important and necessary institutional transformation partly in place and woefully inadequate.

The works and the exhibition design itself should embody a ‘being with’ disability by including not only audible and visual and touchable works, but by making the visual audible, making the audible haptic, making time expandable, making comfort and rest not only possible but readily available. In ways, the ‘commons’ might exist in a world view that still disqualifies.

There are resources within the New York Public Library System we may be able to pull from, particularly the Andrew Heiskell Braille and Talking Book Library. There are disability art-

ists and thinkers I can lean on as consultants where my knowledge and experience is equally inadequate to the task. This year is the 35th anniversary of the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. I see this exhibition as *an opportunity* to push past the risk management aspects of ADA enforcement in public buildings as a case study toward meaningful access in future DOT endeavors.”

I could only hope for a positive response from the team—this felt like a risk, a leap, but I was prepared to put an impassioned, if stumbling, voice behind it at that first curatorial meeting. The curator of the library opened the next meeting with a grateful acknowledgement of my note, saying she hoped to make this an integral element of our conversations.

In follow-up conversations, the other matters of the exhibition became the primary subject of discussion. Writing this now, in the days ahead of the exhibition’s opening, I’ll say that my intention, my commitment to bring access into our meetings as an integral point of curation and exhibition design have at times come to the fore, and at other times, failed.

In the meantime, this text, whatever it becomes by the time of the exhibition, will be included in the exhibition and the Brooklyn Public Library's collection as a loanable set of guiding principles toward accessible exhibition design. Importantly, this text is provisional, and I'll acknowledge its perpetually incomplete state now and in every following version or edition. Indeed, as I've continued to write, this has become a refrain. These guidelines and the principles behind them will change. These will never make an exhibition accessible for everyone. If there is one takeaway I wish to offer a reader of this text, it may be to consider the idea that there is no "everyone" to accommodate. There are individuals, there are communities, there are publics, there are institutions, there are norms, and there are rules built to be broken.

Access is a way of working, relating, and imagining otherwise. In line with disability justice values—and in recognition of the limitations of the Americans with Disabilities Act—this text outlines baseline conditions and shared commitments for collaboration. I feel it important to mention the ADA in the context of its 35th anniversary this year

of 2025 and because this exhibition occurs in a public building falling under the rules of the ADA.

As mentioned, I entered this curatorial project with the intention of prototyping how the access guidelines I've received from artists and writers could be manifested through, for one, an artist group with my contribution of this as an important consideration of our practice of art consultation and exhibition design, but also through a city-wide institution with resources, experience, and practical realities my idealism could butt-up against. Alongside these realities, my inexperience as an advocate.

The guidelines that follow are neither exhaustive nor complete. This will be an ongoing, living document, shaped by collective labor and the understanding that meaningful access is always in progress, but most importantly, in debt to others' work, which I do my best to acknowledge. The following guidelines reflect the influence of artists, thinkers, and organizers whose work has shaped how we practice access not just as compliance, but as culture.

I have asked myself and others why *I* am putting this text together. Not why it's important,

but why I am writing, considering the depth and breadth of the texts from which I've learnt and pulled. In my life as a disabled person, I have been invited into community and aid and accommodation at various points in my life. I mostly rejected those invitations, until recently. I may be wrong, but there is still something I feel in a new sense of identity, becoming, and community that feels off. Maybe it is the newness, maybe it's a flawed ability to experience joy, or pride. Either way, I can't be the only one feeling this way, and this text might act as an expression of that feeling I struggle to find within disability studies and disability justice discourse. Understanding, yearning to learn, and antagonistic, self-preserving distance.

Acknowledgements:

This attempt to coalesce my thinking, experience and research into language was written on the ancestral lands of the Lenape people. The Lenape Nation, also known as the Lenni-Lenape, is the indigenous people who have called this land home for thousands of years. The settler-colonial project that forcibly retains state sponsored control of the island of Manahatta is inextricably linked

to the establishment of the normative standards of race, sex, gender and ability that prevent the return of this land back to the indigenous peoples from whom it was taken. This I add to acknowledge a shared, intersectional struggle.

In addition to the various sources of knowledge and insight whom I've included in the text, I feel it is important to acknowledge my gratitude and indebtedness to the individual mentors, peers and other co-conspirators that have supported my thinking, my writing, my making, and ultimately have produced the person I am: Department of Transformation collaborators Prem Krishnamurthy, Sam Rauch, and Mark Foss, and the Brooklyn Public Library Curator of Visual Art Programming, Cora Fisher; past educators: IV Castellanos, Lan Thao Lam, Azita Moradkhani, Carrie Yamaoka, Kris Grey, Cullen Washington, David L. Johnson, Isaiah Madison, Kiyan Williams, Soyoung Yoon, Ariel Goldberg, Alan Ruiz, Suganda Ghupta, Jonah Groeneboer, Andrea Geyer, and Catherine Telford Keogh; and the friends and thinkers that have offered counsel and supported me in various ways since the outset of my creative practice: Shay Salehi, Devon Hammer, Ry Van Der Hout, Mark Wilson, JJ Pinck-

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1. Multisensory Exhibition Design

Invitation:

Exhibitions should take the vast range of disability into account by embodying a “being with disability,” a phrase inspired by conversations in disability culture that foreground presence, relation, and mutual aid. Works and environments should invite multiple forms of sensory engagement. Primary among these should be:

- Making the visual audible
- Making the audible haptic
- Making time-based work expandable or pausable
- Prioritizing comfort, softness, and rest through seating, quiet areas, and flexible pacing

As disability culture activist and performance artist Petra Kuppers writes, disability culture offers new ways of moving, making, and sensing that challenge normative time and space.

Barrier:

In a class I took during grad school, I once heard about an experience witnessed by audio describers working on a stage play. The users of the audio aid devices she worked on noted witnessing their nearby audience-members reacting to the show differently than they had. Sighted audience members burst out in laughter, cried, gasped in shock, but non-sighted audience members found their audio accompaniment did not elicit those responses. Something was missing in the audio experience to make the experience inequitable as a whole.

One of these audio describers showed previous work in collaboration with video artists. She takes special care to use her timing and inflection to create a more closely shared sensorial experience for those watching versus listening to the recorded video performances.

In the case of the stage play, audio description through headsets were added to an experience designed without the nonvisual audience members; in the case of the video work, audio description was recorded to be integral to the video experience.

The tension here for an exhibition designer/curator exists in the choice of existing works versus commissioning new works; however, the choice of works need not be limited to whatever one might consider fully accessible nor fully multisensory.

2. An Access Doula / Support Roles

Invitation:

An access doula should be designated throughout exhibition design and curatorial practice throughout exhibition projects. This role, inspired by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's framing of access as care work, may be filled by someone on staff or a paid collaborator. Access doulas help hold the porous, relational parts of this work that are often overlooked or undercompensated. This person provides:

- A consistent point of contact for access planning
- Emotional and logistical support to the artist and audience
- A bridge between institutional systems and embodied experience

Barrier:

My experience with this point is centered around financial barriers. Every staff member costs something. For *Letters for the Future*, no access doula has been put in place. In some ways, my role within DOT has been to become the point of con-

tact for access planning, and yet this is not my only role within the group, nor is this position my only job. At the BPL exhibition, there are volunteers to rely on, but they will have varying degrees of familiarity with the space, the show, and the specific works. The accessibility of those works can differ, and there might not be enough information to aid any impairment one could imagine to access those works. Institutional spaces might have some budget to work with, but this is often not the case for independent galleries or more DIY setups.

3. Exhibition Space & Physical Access

Invitation:

In the United States, the Americans with Disabilities Act provides for a broad, general accommodation for individuals with disabilities. Much of these border on risk-management on the part of public buildings, parks, and pathways. In the case of the exhibition at the central branch of the Brooklyn Public Library, for which I first began writing and compiling this guide-of-sorts, issues of egress were covered by their long-standing policies compliant with the ADA. In other areas, such as exhibitions held in galleries throughout New York City, these same elements of egress and others appear rarely considered:

- Ensure step-free access to all areas, including installation and back-of-house
- Maintain circulation paths (minimum 36") and turning space for mobility devices
- Provide seating throughout with varied formats (arms/no arms, high/low, etc.)
- Avoid overstimulating elements (glare, echo, flashing) or clearly label them

-Offer low-stimulation or quiet zones within the exhibition space

This reflects Amanda Cachia's call for curating exhibitions that don't just accommodate access, but reimagine it as an aesthetic and structural priority.

Barrier:

These expectations assumed by the ADA are somewhat invisible to a person like me, born after its passage, therefore having been raised in a United States already affected by its policies. It hasn't been so apparent to me, for example, what something as seemingly ubiquitous as wheelchair accessibility requires on the part of an artist creating an installation burdened by an exhibition space. The space itself has limitations. Questions come up to slow the process down. With limited time to first confirm which of the invited artists can participate and equally limited time to make curatorial decisions about where such works are included, I am set into a position instantly at odds with the text I've designed.

4. Information & Communication Access

Invitation:

I've struggled with this point in this very text, and in the BPL exhibition that sparked this writing. What form, as I'm writing this, will it take when published for the exhibition? What form will the text in the exhibition take? My decision to forego a more thoughtful, artfully designed booklet, and instead use larger print and "Hyperlegible" font was in service of these guidelines. In discussions leading up to the exhibition thus far, it has been difficult to negotiate how these points will come into being:

- Make all wall texts and print materials available in:
- Large print
- Plain language
- Screen-reader-compatible digital formats
- Include alt-text or image descriptions for visual works
- Provide audio description (recorded or live)
- Caption or transcribe all media and performances

As nonvisual learner and artist Carmen Papalia asserts, access is a creative act—a set of rituals and relationships that unfold in time and require care, not just infrastructure.

Barrier:

As the point of contact with an institution putting together the exhibition, with the restraints of budget and the physical space afforded them as well as our group, I have not felt pushback exactly, but this is one of the points that, as we read through them in our access specific meeting, I felt myself pulling back. I have been aware since before my initial access pitch that there is a budget to consider. These points strike me as specifically budgetary, and at least once it was suggested that we wait for someone to ask for increased access before we provide something like an in-depth printed guide in Braille.

5. Public Program Access

Invitation:

Some of these points fall under what the general public might traditionally think of when considering disability—namely deafness. Others are more related to how the public would think of COVID PPE precautions and other neurodivergent needs:

- All events include ASL interpretation and real-time captioning (CART) with advance planning
- Provide remote access options (e.g., livestream with captions or Zoom)
- Designate mask-required hours or events for immunocompromised participants
- Disclose air quality details and use filtration where possible
- Provide a quiet room or sensory-friendly zone during all public programs

Access here means not only entry but belonging—a term writer, educator, and community organizer Mia Mingus links to access intimacy, the deep recognition of access needs as part of loving each other well.

Barrier:

Many spaces will not be able to offer extra space for a quiet or sensory room. The way COVID protocols have relaxed over the past two years, accessing enough masks for an event can be difficult, and it starts to have unintentional effects on the audience: discomfort for some, and worse.

In the case of DOT's exhibition at BPL, part of the hope for the exhibition design was to include "reading room" for visitors to sit and peruse the texts included in the exhibition. In the end, the space itself and a lack of budget for furniture dictated there would not be a specifically quiet space; however, the show is in a library, so there are spaces to which one could retreat for some quiet and some rest.

6. Digital Access

Invitation:

As much as possible, the exhibition should exist outside of the in-person experience for anyone who might prefer to experience the exhibition remotely, including photos, audio description, written guides and recordings of visual moments like performances and talks.

- Ensure websites and digital materials are:
- Compatible with screen readers
- Include alt-text for all images
- Captioned and/or transcribed
- Available in plain text upon request

This digital layer of access is inseparable from physical space—especially for those whose presence may be remote, mediated, or fluctuating.

Barrier:

Several critical questions arise when considering accessibility for the show. Are screen readers available, and how can one effectively craft alt-text that accurately conveys visual information? Furthermore, what are the precise criteria for content to be considered plain text, and how might the implementation of these accessibility features alter the overall experience of the show itself? A significant challenge lies in determining whether these resources should be made proactively available, even before an audience member explicitly requests them. There's also the concern that if such accommodations are created, there's no guarantee they will actually be utilized, leading to potentially wasted effort and resources. Again, a significant budgetary issue has arisen.

7. Artist Access & Support

Invitation:

At most galleries and institutions, art handlers will be employed to install exhibitions. In many situations, these art handlers would be simply informed of what to do, what to install. In others, the artist themselves might be expected to perform this labor. In these cases:

- Allow flexible scheduling for install, walkthroughs, and events
- Provide access to lifts, tools, stools, and adaptive equipment
- Accommodate remote participation during install if needed
- Compensate any access support the artist brings into the process

This echoes the practices of artists like Christine Sun Kim, who demand not just inclusion but transformation—recognizing how norms around production and participation must shift for disabled artists to work safely and fully.

Barrier:

Many established galleries and institutions use art handlers, but from my experience, they cannot be expected to participate with the installation in the way the artist envisions. These workers are often underpaid and employed provisionally. At best, the exhibition would be well planned enough to be welcomely installed with as much care and intention as possible. Sometimes, this doesn't occur, with both DIY and institutional exhibitions. If we expect additional support to be included in installation for the artist that needs that support, it can be hard to bend the budget for the supporter's compensation. Sometimes, particularly with larger institutions like BPL, there are several levels of staff that will encounter the work, the hanging, the budgeting, the contracts, and the install plans far before access support gets involved. At that point, there may not be an option to consider compensation for another person.

8. Ethics of Care & Incomplete Work

Invitation:

Somehow this point holds a special weight for me. In this text, and in exhibitions, many whose labor are involved do not get acknowledged. The work done to create an exhibition, from DIY galleries to large institutions involves more people than are typically recognized. As anyone who has developed an event of any kind knows, organizing them involves so much communication and planning. The community around creating an event for a public to attend, should be acknowledged. This text, exhibitions of different scales, performances, any cultural moment, involves so many people, and, like a research paper, owes a debt to those involved, even tangentially.

- Publicly acknowledge all access labor and contributors (interpreters, describers, consultants)
- Include a note in the exhibition and on digital materials that:
- Access is always incomplete
- Feedback is welcome

-The work is ongoing

As the disability justice collective Sins Invalid reminds us, the basis of this movement is people. We build access not alone, but together—and never perfectly.

Barrier:

An art exhibition, a written text, a song, hold a set of expectations. The conceptual framework of the event can dictate how liberally one can apply the ability to not complete a work for public audiences. The beauty and openness of crip time allows for lateness, for more time to be asked for when needed, for works to be included in a show before they are ready. I see this text in that way; it is not done, and it may never be completed. In fact, the barrier to care and incomplete work may be owned by the creators of the work, but it should, when relevant to the show still be included, at times, when its inclusion can be said to be essential to the show.

Conclusion:

This text remains a living thing—unfinished, but no longer uncertain. What began as a note for an exhibition has become a framework for working within and against the limitations that shape cultural production. The work of access, like the work of art, is iterative: it expands where resources allow and contracts where they don't, but it continues. To advocate for access within an institution means also learning to live with the limits of its budget, its policies, and its pace. These are not excuses, but conditions—realities that determine what can be made possible in any given moment.

Still, I believe something meaningful can happen within those constraints. Each conversation, each small adjustment, each reallocation of care or time is part of the work. Access need not depend on abundance; it depends on relation. When I have felt the strain between what I hoped for and what could be funded, I have tried to hold onto this distinction—to remember that the gesture of trying, of showing up imperfectly, still matters. Limitations expose possibilities.

If this text offers anything, it may be a remind-

er that access is not achieved through completion but through persistence. Its principles will change as I will, shaped by new collaborators, new institutional contexts, and new urgencies. What I hope remains is a shared sense that access is not an extra—something to be afforded when budgets allow—but a way of being with others that gives form to care itself.

This document is provisional, yes, but it is also a commitment: to keep reworking the space between invitation and barrier until they can coexist without contradiction.

Endnote: Lineages

This text reflects and owes much to the work of:

- Carolyn Lazard, *Accessibility in the Arts: A Promise and a Practice*
- Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work* and *The Future is Disabled*
- Amanda Cachia, *The Agency of Access*, and curatorial and scholarly work on disability aesthetics
- I wanna be with you everywhere*, artist collective
- Jerron Herman
- Park McArthur
- Constantina Zavitsanos
- Finnegan Shannon
- Alex Dolores Salerno
- Carmen Papalia, *Open Access* and performance-based access strategies, "An Accessibility Manifesto for the Arts"
- Mia Mingus, "Access Intimacy"
- Petra Kuppers, *Disability Culture and Community Performance*
- Sins Invalid, *Skin, Tooth, and Bone*
- Christine Sun Kim, on Deaf time, translation, and resistance
- Johanna Hedva, *How To Tell When We Will Die*

- David Gissen, *The Architecture of Disability*
- Rosemarie Garland Thomson
- Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*

And many unnamed community members whose access labor is unrecorded but deeply felt <3