

ARTnews

Now Is the Time to Address Issues of Accessibility for Artists and Institutions

By Sara Reisman

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Carmen Papalia (front) in his performance *Blind Field Shuttle*, 2010-ongoing, in San Francisco. Photo: Jordan Reznick.

This past summer, even as it was becoming clear that 2020 would be remembered for the abrupt funneling of social and professional life onto virtual platforms, I came to think it might also be the year that we once and for all expanded our notions of [accessibility](#) in physical space. The impetus for this came when artist Carmen Papalia and I got together for a talk to examine how “access”—a term used loosely in the cultural sector to encapsulate everything from [disability](#) rights to matters of diversity and inclusion—can be broadened in response to our changing times. Presented by the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation, a philanthropic art and social justice organization for which I work as executive and artistic director, the conversation expanded on Papalia’s “Open Access,” an ongoing project that focuses on guidelines for facilitating deeper engagement with a range

of audiences, including those who identify as disabled, neurodiverse, Indigenous, and queer, among many other designations.

Papalia's practice is anchored in the belief that access must be enabled at a variety of scales, from the individual to the institutional, and in ways that engage a range of economic and emotional needs requiring more than just strict adherence to guidelines established by the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#), which, according to many in the disability community, can itself have disabling effects. Along with his partner and collaborator, Kristin Rochelle Lantz, Papalia calls for a responsive body politic empowered with agency and flexibility. His work suggests that official policy often overlooks the nuances of what he calls a "complexity of embodiment" in the public realm.

During our talk, Papalia presented examples of sensory experiences that diverge from the art world's focus on visual art and its bias toward sighted audience members so frequently referred to as "viewers." In the past few years, he has become known for participatory performances that he describes as "nonvisual walks," using his cane (and sometimes a megaphone or even, in the case of a special event on the High Line in New York, a marching band) to lead groups in daisy-chain-like formations that enact the kinds of interdependencies articulated in the principles of "Open Access." Like Papalia's approach to conversations around accessibility in general, instructions for the walks avoid medicalizing terminology and frame the experience as a function of embodiment instead.

I have participated in three such walks, and each has recalibrated my relationship to the environment and people around me. In a rural setting, I felt rocks and dips in the dirt road under my feet. In an urban landscape, I felt pavement, curbs, and the presence of vehicles in constant motion. Each time, I have experienced the world with a heightened sense of perception—and my understanding of the sensorium has been further transformed.



Carmen Papalia's performance *Mobility Device*, 2019, on the High Line. Photo: Carlos David.

My own awareness of issues around disability in public life came about in 2014 while I was working for Percent for Art, a civic program that commissions permanent public art for spaces around New York City. The beginning of Mayor Bill de Blasio’s first term marked a shift to more stringent adherence to inclusive guidelines for the design and construction of public spaces, including public art. This shift meant that creating public artworks required thinking through different modes of experience, so that someone in a wheelchair could have an equitable, if not identical, experience of an artwork as a nondisabled person. It also meant that projects underway were being reevaluated to ensure that audiences with disabilities could have meaningful experiences of the artwork on their own terms.



The author [Sara Reisman](#), is the Executive and Artistic Director of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation in New York. Photo: Raul Zbengheci.

Among the commissions that raised questions about access was Julianne Swartz’s *Four Directions from Hunters Point*, which features four portals that cut through the external walls of the architecturally striking Hunters Point Library in Queens. The project’s focus on shifting the viewer’s visual perception of the surrounding cityscape itself prioritized sighted members of the public. But what stood out all the more glaringly in the review process was that one of the portals was located on a stairwell landing—an insufficiently accessible setting for audiences of numerous kinds.

Other projects raised different questions. A proposal from Mierle Laderman Ukeles for an architectural viewing platform nestled between two earthworks in Freshkills Park included input from an architect and engineer to accommodate wheelchairs. But the earthworks posed a challenge with natural ground cover (grass and dirt) that is difficult to traverse.

Similarly, Mary Miss’s *The Passage, Staten Island*

Memorial Green required moving an illuminated column to position it on a more appropriately graded surface. That was the result once again of issues related to wheelchair access, but when the work opened to the public, Miss introduced an interactive audio component to expand on her creation’s historical context and provide another means of access.

Each of these artworks presented puzzles specific to site, medium, concept, and intended audience—which, especially in public space, can never be fully anticipated. And elements of those puzzles remain as design guidelines for accessibility continue to evolve.



From left, curator Catherine Morris, artist Pelenakeke Brown, and dancers Donald Lee and Jerron Herman at the event *Access Check: Mapping Accessibility 2.0*, 2019, at The 8th Floor. Photo: William Furio.

When I left my job at Percent for Art in 2014, my intent at the time was to curate an exhibition that addressed disability for The 8th Floor, the exhibition and events space operated by the Rubin Foundation. Just a year before, I had seen Park McArthur’s exhibition “Ramps” at Essex Street Gallery, for which she acquired a variety of ramp-like objects—some makeshift, others purpose-built—that had been installed for her to traverse otherwise inaccessible thresholds into galleries, studios, schools, and other venues. Through the act of moving them into the gallery, McArthur signaled how, as an exhibition description put it, the ramps’ “absence from their initially intended sites conforms to the general absence of access at every other cultural and physical institution we attend.”

McArthur’s work struck a nerve, bringing to mind instances, both as a visitor to exhibitions and as a curator, when omissions of access were so painfully apparent. How did I miss so many signs of problems so in need of addressing?

Since 2015, the Rubin Foundation has programmed events in recognition of Disability Awareness Month—celebrated in July to commemorate the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act back in 1990. After a few years, it became clear that a standalone annual program was not enough and that we needed to advocate for deeper awareness of disability justice by incorporating the focus into our programming in an ongoing way.

In 2019, I approached artist Jerron Herman about collaborating on a public workshop to which we invited a group of artists and cultural producers to present case studies of situations when matters of access had been tested or advanced. One of the speakers, Kevin Gotkin, presented two glaring instances in which architectural access has been denied by requiring the use of stairs: *The Vessel*, Thomas Heatherwick’s towering monument at Hudson Yards, and Four Freedoms Park on Roosevelt Island.

Donald Lee, a bilateral amputee dancer, discussed examples of artistic and curatorial practices that promote inclusion.

As the conversation deepened, the five panelists agreed to a need for further discussion, so we later formed a fluctuating working group of artists and activists called Access Check. During our first session, in December 2019, participants voiced frustration with cultural organizations that remain distressingly unprepared to work with disabled individuals. Others described being called upon to advise distinguished institutions, often without pay, for what they felt was a desire to merely give the appearance of being meaningfully engaged with disability. Certain phrases emerged—among them “authentic commitment” and “shared responsibility”—that led to a central question: What does authentic commitment involve? Donald Lee responded, “Authentic commitment is the pairing of open lines of communication and the institution’s ability to respond to access issues, understanding that they will be doing ongoing work and are also in a continual learning process.”



Donald Lee performing in *ON DISPLAY* during Citi Summer Streets, New York, 2016. Photo: Amro Arida

Being nondisabled in this discussion raises questions about my own commitment. How can I fully comprehend the conditions of disability? What motivates this interest? And how do I ensure that my work in support of disability justice properly honors the experiences of this community? Because of these questions, I have grown increasingly aware of how urgent it is to explore how an “authentic commitment” to disability justice can be realized at a time when disability is on the rise and, according to United Nations Secretary General António Guterres, “people with disabilities are among the hardest hit by Covid-19.”

As Access Check continues to meet, we have been drafting a survey to better understand the practical implications of social policies, funding strategies, and organizational practices around accessibility. The survey will be conducted in two parts: one for artists and cultural producers with disabilities to reflect on their experiences, and the other serve as an evaluative tool for institutions. The kinds of questions we want to ask artists and cultural producers include:

- *Is compliance as stipulated by the ADA enough?*
- *Can you cite examples of strong access integration?*
- *How does access become part of everyday conversation in institutional culture?*

As for institutions, we would like to know:

- *What is the most ethical and meaningful way to identify disability?*
- *How do you determine access needs, as some disabilities are not visible and there might be a hesitancy to share one's disability or access needs?*

My hope is that the survey—the results of which we hope to distribute next year—will encourage institutions to self-reflect while motivating practical changes to honor the work of artists and audiences with disabilities, and to establish tools—perhaps like those that the organization Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.) has formulated for fair pay—for disabled and nondisabled individuals to advocate for ethical engagement. It is important for all of us, and it requires active participation in an ongoing, iterative process for which the time is now.

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