For a New Accessibility

Carmen Papalia

Chapter Four

In this growing landscape of non-option institutional support services, those with diverse and complex needs are routinely disempowered by the systems that they rely upon in order to maintain their basic health and well-being. This deeply rooted oppression plays out in schools, hospitals, cultural institutions, policing organizations, and through various arms of government, making one's effort to claim agency a strategic, high-stakes intervention. However, if access was defined by an open, collective process, would the systems that those in need rely upon be accessible as needs change and as institutional entities evolve? What might the tenets of an open model for access be? This chapter explores how I have negotiated these considerations in life and in my socially-engaged art practice, outlining the strategies that I have employed in order to find a community of support in the midst of a complex set of disabling social and cultural conditions.

I started to resist aspects of the support that I was receiving from the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) in 2005, when I was most in need of support. I was trying to make a habit of using the standard-issue white cane that I got from my case worker, but it was difficult for me to fully embrace it on account of the added challenges that it brought. It would help me find steps so I wouldn't trip over them, but whenever I

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would reach out and sweep for one I would feel like I was waving the flag for an organization that I didn't believe in; a surrender flag that people honored by either insistently helping me or asking personal questions about my health. As taxing as these interactions were, the isolation that resulted from the various ways that the cane distanced me from others was even more disabling. Sensing my skepticism for my new, awkward appendage, my case worker offered that the cane would be my key to an independent lifestyle. It was widely-recognized as the most effective way for me to advocate for myself. While he was speaking from experience, I learned that my case worker's view was consistent with the mission of the CNIB and other support-based organizations that operate under a rehabilitation paradigm. The fact that I was being encouraged to accept a single, predefined track that would help me "reintegrate" into my community was evidence of this. How had I become estranged from my community in the process of seeking support? The more I questioned the institution and proposed options that had the potential to work for me, the more I was convinced that it was the institution that was the primary disabling factor in my life. One day, I peeled all the red and white tape off my cane so the entire length of it was the color of the graphite material underneath. It was my first act of protest against the institution; my first difficult step away from the sense of safety that I had ascribed to it.

In the following pages I will reflect on my process of finding comfort and claiming agency as someone with complex

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needs. I will share the language, politics, and strategies that have been instrumental to my effort in resisting the social and cultural conditions that I have found to be the most disabling, and I will outline how these resources have helped me identify an autonomous space where I have the freedom to manage my support. I will describe the various interventions that I have produced as a social practice artist and will focus on my proposal for Open Access: a set of five tenets that describe a relational practice concerning the agreement to be in support of others, which I realized in 2015 while planning for an unsolicited, collective accessibility audit of the Vancouver Art Gallery. I will begin by detailing some of the experiences that have helped me realize a politics of accessibility as I maintain the confidence necessary to distance myself from institutional support services. I will also share my decision to not use sight and how this choice led to a host of opportunities for me to challenge the disabling systems and practices that, prior to my descent, I didn't know I could change.

How to Close Your Eyes

Once I had written off the CNIB, I made an intentional effort to unlearn my visual biases and exercise my non-visual senses. I spent afternoons listening intently to my surroundings and enjoyed different aspects of the voices of the people in my life. Instead of advocating for myself as someone who was blind or visually impaired, I focused on the many ways that the orientation of my senses, or embodiment, informed the way I learned, and traded my visual frame of reference for a new position as a non-visual learner. This slight shift revealed

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a vast and vibrant dimension, one that I could access by shutting my eyes and trusting in what I could hear, feel, taste, and smell. It revealed an alternative to visual culture, a rupture through which I could find my own references and proceed on my terms.

While the process of self-identifying as a non-visual learner was profoundly liberating, I still couldn't escape the fact that I was living in an ocular-centric world, the culmination of centuries of looking and visual learning. In every aspect of my life, from the way I approached relationships to my experiences navigating the various cities that I lived in, I felt the influence of the visual learners of long ago. This was compounded by the fact that I, having relied upon sight until I was twenty-one, still found it difficult to discard the visual references that continued to shape my perceptions. Despite certain myths, I had an active visual memory and sometimes saw shapes that referred to objects in my cloudy visual field. This new point of orientation helped me realize that in order to thrive as a non-visual learner, I would have to establish a space where I could find comfort being myself, a space where I did not feel marginalized by the conditions of visual primacy; not a physical space where I could escape the visual world, but a pedagogical space that would put some distance between me and what I felt was compromising my access as a non-visual learner. Each time I used my new identifier I gained practice advocating for myself, and each time I advocated for myself my politics became clearer. My politics would eventually allow me to believe that I am disabled, not by the status of my body, but by a complex set of social and cultural conditions that limit my agency and potential to thrive. Somehow I appreciated this position over the idea

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of rehabilitating myself so that I might better fit into the pervasive visual culture.

The idea that an external set of conditions posed by society and culture could be responsible for my experience of disability was strangely comforting. Surely I could improve my access if I identified the conditions that I found to be the most disabling and made a dedicated effort to interrupt those conditions. While the prospect of initiating a social and cultural shift to my benefit seemed impossible, I found reassurance in the one-on-one and small-group interactions in which I could challenge the language and hierarchies that positioned me. Sometimes it was as simple as introducing myself to a group as a non-visual learner, while at other times it required a generous conversation about my choice not to use sight with the most annoyingly curious person on the bus. While impossible to measure, the effect of these tiny gestures felt like small strides forward; with each step I was convinced that my status as a disabled person could change if the values and collective politics of my community changed. As I continued to find new ways to express my politics and advocate for my needs, I began to think of my status as a disabled person as both an indicator of my access and of the state of society and culture itself. I knew that if I wanted my access to improve, I would have to resist institutional support services and find ways to connect with others for support.

From Radical Accessibility to Open Access

I first heard the term radical accessibility in a session about decolonization at the Social Spaces Summit in Vancouver in 2013, and I was later introduced to romham pádraig gallacher's Radical Access

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Mapping Project (RAMP), a brilliant open source platform that helps community members assess the conditions of access in public spaces with a comprehensive template that guides their investigation. I was drawn to the fact that the term ties the practice of accessibility to the potential for fundamental change, but I was unclear about the origin of the term and its usage; I could not find reference to radical accessibility outside of its use in radical grassroots communities or in relation to gallacher's RAMP project. Shortly after the summit, I joined the local conversation in Vancouver and started to use the term to describe an approach to facilitating access that grows from the grassroots of a community, which is radically different than a standard policy-based approach that centers on the state of physical access. As I continued to share the concept in my workshops and presentations, radical accessibility became an open term for me, a placeholder for all the considerations that I felt were missing in discussions about accessibility, such as considerations of power, oppression, strategy, agency, mutuality, solidarity, collaboration, creative practice and justice.

While I found the term to be helpful in gesturing toward the potential for a new way to practice accessibility, I still struggled to describe the sort of access that I was conceptualizing beyond identifying it as being radically different than the access that was often available to me. In the museum, for example, my options for engaging with works on display as a non-visual learner have typically been limited to listening to verbal descriptions or indiscriminately touching sculptural reproductions and texture samples. These options are most often produced by sighted designers according to false

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stereotypes of blind or visually impaired users, offering alternatives to the viewing experience that don't reflect the original intentions of artists and which are not considered to be relevant outside of the marginal space of access programs. In these situations, I have never been asked what my preferences are, and the consequences of the decisions that are made on my behalf are never acknowledged or discussed. Whether they were provided by the colleges that I attended or the airlines that I used, access accommodations have followed similar guidelines and have most often made me feel isolated from my peers and frustrated by the prescriptive nature of the services offered. This was the landscape of support services that I was familiar with and it seemed to be this way everywhere. I knew that by conceptualizing what a new approach to accessibility might be, I would direct my effort far from this terrible formula for anticipating needs, and toward a practice that could radically transform accessibility into something that wouldn't further marginalize those who practice it. At the center, I thought, should be one's ability to claim and hold agency.

In order to start a dialogue about a more humanizing approach to accessibility, I curated a panel at the Queens Museum in New York in 2013 and invited friends in the disability community, Amanda Cachia, Laura Swanson, Sunaura Taylor and Sandie Yi, to join me in thinking through accessibility as a social practice. While I was the only one in the group who identified as a social practice artist, each participant was experienced in advocating for herself as a disabled artist or curator in a contemporary art context; an intentional practice that requires a degree of creative problem solving and the

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skills necessary to find support and maintain mutual relationships. As we considered access in the museum in relation to the growing field of socially-engaged art practice, we noticed parallels between the conventions of accessibility initiatives and the ways in which certain artists, curators, and museum workers approach public engagement. Both practices seek to employ innovative strategies as a means of connecting the subject to an object, place, or experience. For a moment I wondered if radical accessibility could simply be a responsive and sincere approach to public engagement.

This thought felt like progress. I wondered why we were among the few people who were discussing accessibility in relation to socially-engaged art practice. It was clear to me that I should continue to make space for this conversation about a new accessibility from my position in the social practice community so it could move beyond the realm of disability discourse and have the potential to draw upon a related history or strategy that might propel it forward. I wondered, if this new accessibility were to live in a wide open field where it could grow in any direction, would it become more culturally relevant than the current, common paradigm for accessibility?

As we wrapped up our discussion and began to take questions from the audience, a voice belonging to Stephanie Nadeau, the Curator of Public Engagement at the Ottawa Art Gallery, asked how one might establish a radically accessible space in a museum. After my fellow panelists deferred to me, I said that I didn't think it was possible to make the museum radically accessible because the structure, a hierarchy, enables the select few who hold power in the museum to obstruct access to the platform and the resources therein. I continued

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by offering examples of the two spaces in Vancouver that I consider to be the most radically accessible: the collectively-run Gallery Gachet and the now defunct Purple Thistle Centre, a youth-centered community space for arts and activism that was organized by a youth collective for over seventeen years. Both spaces, like many queer and indigenous resource centers, employ certain strategies in order to ensure that their services are easily available to the communities that they serve. I thought that the example of an autonomous, peer-led, grassroots resource centre that actively serves a marginalized community was the best reference that I could offer in this effort toward realizing a model for a truly radically accessible space.

In the months following the panel I returned to Stephanie's question time and time again. The museum—a so-called "public" platform where only a select few have the privilege of access—seemed to offer the perfect context from which to conceptualize the conditions of radical accessibility. I began by conducting a thought experiment, hoping that it would refine my thinking and reveal something about accessibility that I hadn't yet considered. Then a vision of a museum staff member pinning a sign to a gallery wall that read "THIS SPACE IS RADICALLY ACCESSIBLE" came to mind.

Soon thoughts were flooding in. Surely, calling a space radically accessible wouldn't change much. Whether or not a space is accessible depends on so many things, the most important of which is the condition of the social space. And how might we assess the condition of the social environment when so many of the current strategies for ensuring accessibility center on limiting physical barriers? I figured that a paradigm that promotes social accessibility would likely have

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the interests of everyone who is disabled by a set of social and cultural conditions in mind, not just the interests of the disability community. It would depend on the collective politics of a space and whether it is being held to a set of tenets that promote a welcoming atmosphere in which those who feel inclined to enter may hold agency and thrive. It would account for the disabling conditions informed by histories of oppression, marginalization, and trauma by creating opportunities for acts of transformative justice.

Keeping the frame that I had established in mind, I continued brainstorming and wondered what conditions might nurture radical accessibility given the current state of publicness in museums. Any gesture toward engaging the public would surely have to be a long, messy process that centers on maintaining long-term, mutual relationships with community members who do not feel welcome in the museum and who are not yet part of what might be thought of as the museum community. After a relationship was established, someone who is dedicated to holding space in the interest of maintaining publicness—who would likely occupy a position of power and have access to institutional resources—would have to support an intervention that would interrupt the conditions that the visitor or visiting public had identified as being disabling. Their interest in providing support would have to be sincere, not bound up in some initiative to help the institution qualify for funding. Even then, the effect of this work wouldn't be permanent; the museum's hierarchical structure and its ongoing tradition of cultural violence—such as the numerous examples of museums holding the belongings of various indigenous communities in collection—wouldn't allow it. These conditions, without an ongoing

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initiative to resolve them, would ensure that the platform remained oppressive. One could only hope that the culture of the museum might lend itself to some form of accountability, and that any critical action would be understood as a necessary exchange with those who feel like the museum is not for them. Whatever the case, trust would have to guide the process so any exchange toward justice could move beyond a fleeting and potentially marginalizing one-off interaction.

I attempted to refine some of the key concepts that emerged throughout my process by translating them into a concise position statement that describes the tenets of an ideal, working, support-based, exchange. Instead of centering this investigation on one's ability to hold agency in the context of the museum, I decided to shift my focus and identify the conditions that would nurture a welcoming learning experience. I wrote from my subjective position, keeping my own needs and preferences in mind. The following is the language that emerged in that session of exploratory writing:

> Open Access relies on those present, what their needs are and how they can find support with each other and in their communities. It is a perpetual negotiation of trust between those who elect to be in support of one another in a mutual exchange.

> Open Access is radically different than a model in which a set of policies is employed in order to facilitate a common experience for a group with definitive needs. It acknowledges that everyone carries a body of local knowledge and is an expert in their own right.

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Open access is the root system of embodied learning. It cultivates trust among those involved and enables each member to self-identify and occupy a point of orientation that is based in complex embodiment.

Open Access interrupts the disabling power structures that limit one's agency and potential to thrive. It reimagines normalcy as a continuum of embodiments, identities, realities and learning styles, and operates under the tenet that care and a shared accountability among participants are core components of liberated space.

Open Access is an emergent, collectively-held space in which members can find comfort in disclosing their needs and preferences with one another. It is a responsive support network that adapts as needs and available resources change.

The Bureau of Radical Accessibility

I went on to use the Open Access statement to describe my politics and shared it whenever I had the chance. When I presented the concept during artist talks, I gave an edition of prints featuring the Open Access tenets to each member of the audience and hung one of five large protest-style canvas banners—made by my partner Kristin Lantz—in an effort to hold space for the ideas that the statement promotes. I eventually thought of Open Access as a conceptual work and wondered how I might apply the tenets in various contexts as a durational project.

Satisfied with the language that I had settled upon, I wrote a few friends and shared the Open Access statement along with my current

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thoughts regarding museum publicness. Megan Arney Johnston, who had recently accepted a position as the director of the Model Contemporary Art Center in Sligo Ireland, was the first to respond with words of encouragement. After passing messages back and forth, Megan shared the changes that she had recently employed at the Model, including her effort to dissolve the museum departments so staff members could do the work they found most fulfilling, rather than the work required by their job titles. The shift was challenging but effective and in line with Megan's vision, which upheld an ongoing and critical consideration of accessibility toward institutional permeability and fair and responsive public engagement. Embodying this vision was the Bureau of Radical Accessibility, a residency program that echoed my ideas regarding open and emergent models for access, which established a pedagogical space within the institution where visiting artists and community members could engage accessibility as a creative practice.

I wanted to share my proposal for Open Access with a wider audience and was thrilled when Megan eventually invited Kristin and me to the Model as some of the first resident artists to pass through the Bureau. Megan was familiar with my early experiences as a working artist and the few instances in which my host failed to secure accommodations for me after I had disclosed my needs, and was dedicated to holding space for me and advocating for my ideas within the museum community. I felt the effect of Megan's support even before I booked my airline ticket; I knew that she would approach our collaboration with trust and the willingness to consider my recommendations. She had already collapsed the boundaries between departments in order to enliven the motivations of her staff, an

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action that reflected her commitment to challenge the tradition of conservatism at the institution. Rather than sending project sketches for possible interventions, Megan encouraged Kristin and I to hold off on developing any projects prior to our three-week stay so that we could respond to the Model in ways we felt necessary. We agreed to begin with an artist talk and group meeting with staff so that we could introduce ourselves and establish relationships. This seemed like a good way to enter the space.

After we met the staff and the people who came for our talks, Kristin and I formulated a semblance of a plan for what we would do while in residence. Instead of ensuring that access policies were in place and available, or employing the many recommendations outlined in the Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibition Design, I used the Bureau as a platform to share my expanded definition of accessibility and make site-specific projects about access in the museum. Kristin supported me, documented my efforts, and interviewed staff about the institutional privileges that they have in an effort to initiate an exchange in which they would redistribute their access to a member or group in the local community. It was encouraging to know that Megan considered our presence to be an extension of her future vision for the Model. The opportunity to work with her was a rare chance to learn from someone who was both kind and radical, someone who was up for a challenge and who had the privilege to make decisions that could promote change.

Although I managed to gather a sense of the culture and collective politics of the Model after conducting a week of sessions that focused on the tenants of Open Access, I still felt disoriented

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by the layout of the small art center. In an effort to improve my ease of movement through the galleries, I employed a temporary system of access for myself, a series of three red strings that indicated my common walking routes. From the base of the table that I used in the café to an errant screw in a second-floor gallery wall, I tied the bright red string to the firmly-situated fixtures that I found in the areas that were familiar to me. I used the string as a tactile way-finding tool while navigating independently, and asked whomever was around to direct me back to it when I lost my way. <u>I reveled in the fact that while its placement was convenient for me, it obstructed certain walking routes for others.</u> A single red string not only improved my access, but it also helped me illustrate the idea that accessibility can be approached as a user-defined creative process, a temporary agreement with the potential to serve the dual purpose of increasing one's agency and interrupting the disabling power structures that are present.

While exploring the galleries on the second floor, I found another opportunity to intervene: an exhibition space featuring paintings from the Model's permanent collection, which were hung at around fifty-eight inches, the standard height for viewing from a standing position. The familiar layout of the show got me thinking

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about my own access in the museum and how I often have to find my own way to experience a particular work due to the limited non-visual access that the museum allows. Erik Ferguson—a punk Butoh dancer and disability activist—came to mind. I recalled a conversation in which he gleefully described a Butoh performance that took place at a local farm in Portland which he concluded by leaving his chair and crawling in the dirt and mud. This image was inspired by a conversation in which we discussed the possibility of an exhibition space that could feed the curiosities of someone who occupies an atypical vantage point.

With these references in mind, I proposed a project that catered to the orientation of Erik's body, which would encourage standing viewers to crouch and crawl. The intervention, titled "For Erik Ferguson," is a rehang in which each wall-hung object was lowered to sit only inches from the gallery floor. Most visitors had to contort their bodies in order to become eye-level with the work on display. The gallery spotlights illuminated the process, remaining in their original position and floating like apparitions above each lowered piece. Hoping that the noise of drilling would bring some attention to the project, I scheduled the installation during the opening of a well-attended contemporary photo

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exhibition. My hope was that this shift would not only produce a disabling viewing experience for typical visitors, but would also serve as an invitation to break the tradition of passive viewing at the institution by requiring visitors to problem solve their access and realize an active, embodied way into the work.

The New Access Consortium Presents: A Collective Audit of the Vancouver Art Gallery

In the months following Sligo, I questioned whether the Open Access tenets could be used as a framework to assess the conditions of access in public and institutional spaces. To help answer this question, I invited a group of six artists and activists from diverse backgrounds, with whom I had worked over the past few years, to gather each week to engage in discussions and creative investigations about accessibility. We met at Gallery Gachet, a collectively-run low barrier exhibition space and community resource center in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Participants included Arlene Bowman, romham pádraig gallacher, Taryn Goodwin, Jotika, Myah Catherine Rose Wallace, and aly de la cruz yip, all of whom brought an intentional lived practice of advocacy emerging from their experience of limited access or social and cultural marginalization. While some participants identified as disabled, others had built a personal politics as a means of protecting their well-being as young, Indigenous, trans, queer, mad, or as persons of color. Identifying the common thread between us—that we each were experienced in finding ways to claim and hold agency in the midst of multiple forms of oppression—we discussed accessibility for three months beginning September 2015.
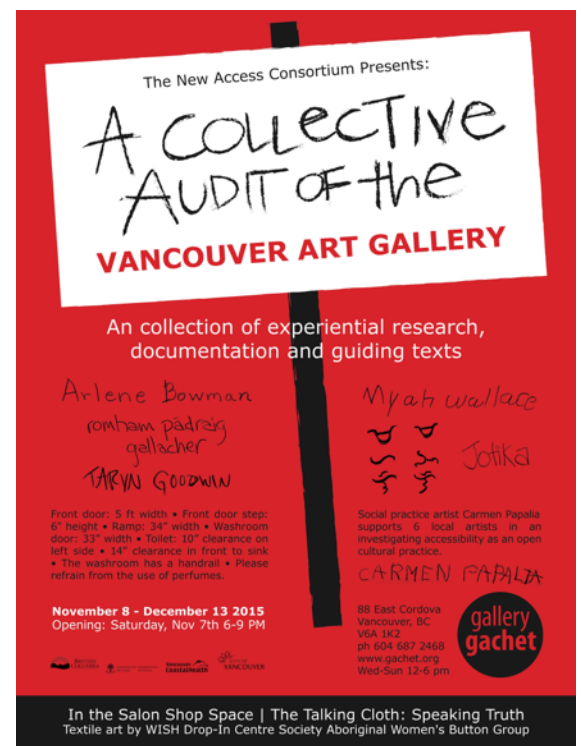
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The privilege to conduct this work at the gallery grew out of years of relationships with members of the Gachet community. I was introduced to the space in 2012, after being invited to participate in Madness + Mobility: The Art of Inclusion, my first opportunity to show work in Canada. Even then, my interactions with the community were limited. I hadn't yet made friendships with collective members, let alone relationships with residents of the Downtown Eastside. When attending a workshop or celebration, I still felt as if I was taking up space that was meant for someone else. Substantial relationships began to coalesce after Kristen and I started working with a group of artists as part of Nothing About Us Without Us, the three-month meeting series and culminating exhibition about publicness and access to local cultural platforms that we proposed. The opportunity to develop this work with the gallery's support was our formal invitation to join the community.

I identified with Gachet's tagline "Art is a means for survival" as I processed the difficulty of my experience and made work that allowed me to feel safe and supported in unsafe and unsupportive environments. I also related to many of the artists at Gachet through the common experience of facing multiple barriers as the result of disabling social and cultural conditions. Kristin and I appreciated Gachet's collective structure, its position as an open community space, and its focus on supporting the developing creative practices of artists. We appreciated that it didn't identify as a disability art center, but had supported the lives and careers of disabled artists for over twenty years. The collective eventually asked Kristin to join Gachet's small team of staff to help build programs and offer

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curatorial support. It was the ideal site for developing a methodology for assessing the conditions of access.

At our first meeting I brought my past work, including the Open Access statement, and offered it to the group as a potential starting point for discussion. In an effort to acknowledge ourselves as experts on our own access considerations, we responded to the question "what conditions must be in place in order for you to thrive or elect into the museum community." A list of "I want" statements outlining the group's urgent, subjective needs emerged. Statements ranged from "I want the museum to stop charging for admission" to "I want decision makers to be poor, sick and disabled, Queer and Trans People of colour," as well as nuanced statements regarding wellness, representation, identity, safety, and agency. Using this list to guide our inquiry, we set our focus on the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG) and assessed its social accessibility from our position as practicing artists and museum visitors.

Our focus on the VAG grew out of our commitment to creative practice and a shared sense that museums are valuable cultural platforms that hold knowledge and opportunities for learning, while our focus on social accessibility came about after we identified it as the underlying condition that determines whether a community will uphold tenets that promote safety, access, and agency for its members. Our assessment would not result in a set of policies or

The New Access Consortium Presents:

A COLLECTIVE AUDIT OF the VANCOUVER ART GALLERY

An collection of experiential research, documentation and guiding texts

Arlene Bowman
romham pádraig gallacher
TARYN GOODWIN

Myah wallace

Jotika

Front door: 5 ft width • Front door step: 6" height • Ramp: 34" width • Washroom door: 33" width • Toilet: 10" clearance on left side • 14" clearance in front to sink • The washroom has a handrail • Please refrain from the use of perfumes.

Social practice artist Carmen Papalia supports 6 local artists in an investigating accessibility as an open cultural practice.

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recommendations for best practices since policies—such as those outlined in the Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibition Design—do not often empower communities to actively share accountability, practice mutual aid, engage in unlearning, center local and cultural knowledge, or claim and hold agency. Instead, we voiced a collective declaration in the form of an exhibition at Gallery Gachet entitled The New Access Consortium Presents: A Collective Audit of the Vancouver Art Gallery, highlighting experiential research, guiding texts, and documentation from our process in order to initiate a dialogue about access to cultural platforms and support in the arts in Vancouver.

The catalyst was our group trip to the VAG, upon which we felt an urgent need to offer a critique of the disabling culture of the institution, its long history of oppressive practices, and the uncomfortable social space therein. The experience that crystallized our view was our assessment of the framing text that accompanied a collection of photos by Christos Dikeakos displayed in a fourth floor gallery as part of Next: A Series of Artist Projects from the Pacific Rim. We were struck by the way the writer—who we were shocked to learn was Chief Curator and Associate Director of the institution—misrepresented colonization and the plight of Indigenous communities upon first contact with European settlers. We wondered to what degree the text had been reviewed before being printed, especially since promotional materials for the exhibition claimed that the show "strengthens immeasurably the VAG's ability to tell the story of the Northwest Coast." We wondered how the framing text would have read if it had been written in the context of a socially responsive space such

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as Gachet, a line of inquiry that led us to reproduce the wall panel and conduct a collective red pen edit as a de-colonialized counter-narrative to the original text. In bright red corrective marker, one participant offered the traditional Squamish name for False Creek, Xáywa7esks, while another reframed relations between Indigenous communities and settlers as genocide. While it was produced as part of an investigative exercise, we ultimately decided to include the revised wall panel in our culminating exhibition.

During our next meeting at Gachet, we discussed some of our independent research. aly de la cruz yip talked about her training in physical theatre, or clowning, with a warm up practice in which the performer moves her body in order to release tension, find comfort, and become open to improvisation. aly returned to the gallery and employed clowning warm up exercises and ancestral knowledge as a means of navigating the discomfort held in the space. This intervention, which she titled Bruha: Chou, inevitably became aly's contribution to the exhibition, and was screened alongside our red pen edit of the wall panel. The installation got us thinking about the museum community at the VAG and wondering who the intended audience for the

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work on display was. If the VAG wasn't for a diverse group of socially-engaged artists, then who was it for? We concluded that the VAG, based on the qualities of its social space, was oppressive on a number of levels and therefore not accessible by our standards. We resolved to discount the gallery as a public institution until the culture within reflected the living communities in Vancouver, unceded Coast Salish Territory.

For a New Accessibility

Two weeks after the opening of our culminating exhibition, we put out chairs and hosted For a New Accessibility, a three-day convergence of artists and activists on the topic of organizing for accessibility and mutual aid. I, with support from Anthony Meza-Wilson—a local community advocate who is the Volunteer and Facility Manager at Gallery Gachet—put together a schedule of events through a partnership with the Contemporary Art Gallery. With relics from our audit of the VAG serving as our backdrop, we welcomed members from diverse communities to take part in a cross-movement dialogue about accessibility as it had been framed during the audit: a relational practice central to one's potential to hold agency and thrive. Presenters included Amanda Cachia, Zoe Kreye, Jason DaSilva, Margret Dragu, Enterprising Women Making Art, Hannah Jickling, Heidi Nagtegaal, Lisa Prentice, Helen Reed, Reverb: A Queer Reading Series, the Surrey Youth Space, and Olivia Whetung. After sx̱ełemtənaːt / Audrey Siegl opened the space to visitors with an acknowledgement of Indigenous land and a ceremonial song, I mentioned that my intention in putting this diverse group of presenters together was to decenter the disability community and expand the discourse for anyone whose

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agency and potential to thrive is limited by a complex set of social and cultural conditions. The convergence initiated a series of actions, workshops, discussions, screenings, and performances through which participants could consider topics ranging from the publicness of local cultural platforms to current efforts to preserve Indigenous languages. It was encouraging to witness the solidarity effort of the convergence in action. A core group of participants attended most of the events and propelled discussions forward. The intersectionality that the program produced was a welcome change to Vancouver's otherwise isolating art community.

I returned home from the culminating panel during the convergence, reminiscing with Kristin about our weekend amongst friends and wishing that our out-of-town guests lived in Vancouver. In an effort to continue the dialogue that we started during the three months of meetings prior to the convergence, I developed a version of the program that led to the audit for groups with whom I cannot spend three months. The six-hour workshop begins with roughly an hour-long performance of my eyes-closed walking tour, titled <u>Blind Field Shuttle</u>, which is intended to bring everyone into the same pedagogical space. Then we gather and introducing ourselves, share stories about accessibility as I have defined it: a measure of one's potential to claim and hold agency. After a presentation about the collective auditing project at

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the VAG, we break into small groups to study each paragraph of the Open Access statement and discuss how it relates to the work we are engaged in.

The workshop concludes with an activity that changes based on who is present; if participants have access to a public platform, I ask them to identify their institutional privileges so they may begin to redistribute their access to a member or group in the local community. Alternatively, if participants are disabled—by social or cultural barriers—I ask them to identify what it is they need. The collection of "I want" statements that the group at Gachet produced prior to the collective accessibility audit of the VAG was the first iteration of this exercise. It was our first step in assessing the collective needs and politics of the group and established a framework that directed the focus of the audit.

I want to blend into a crowd.

I want to attend university without having to do a whole bunch of paperwork to secure accommodations.

I want to walk without my cuff crutches and for people to get out of my way.

I want acknowledgement of the existing power dynamics in the space; I want people to question why that power exists in the first place.

I want venues to be completely wheelchair and scooter accessible, at the minimum.

I want there to be a sense of connection and relevance to local communities and land.

I want larger printed text.

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I want a Pay-What-You-Can/By-Donation option for admission which doesn't shame people.

I want things to be hung at varying heights.

I want a scent reduced space.

I want seating that is comfortable and supportive of larger bodies and of people who would like to lay down.

I want all of the workers in the space (from janitorial and tech support to programming) to be paid fairly, have opportunities to rest, and for their ideas for the space and the people in it to be taken seriously.

I want specific acknowledgement of the Indigenous land that the space is on.

I want to not just be able to physically get into the space; I want to have a real chance at being a part of things once i'm in.

I want to be able to sit on the ground when I'm viewing art in a gallery.

I want curators to consider physical access when developing the layout for their shows.

I want the Vancouver Art gallery to hire an Access Coordinator.

I want to engage in more playful systems of policy making and change.

I want museums to stop teaching children about art; I want children to start teaching museums about access.

I want multi-modal learning access to every curatorial essay.

I want the Vancouver Art Gallery to hire a disabled person for a leadership role in curating.

I want the Vancouver Art Gallery to stop charging $20 for admission.

I want the art community in Vancouver to be less academic.

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I want openings to be more fun and less weird and intimidating.

I want people who work in public institutions to know that their job is to hold space for local communities.

I want to touch the art.

I want to understand the work on display without having to read about it first.

I want spaces where I can feel safer.

I want spaces where I can bring my whole self; where all of the parts of my identity are honored and recognized.

I want anti colonial practices to be talked about and put into practice.

I want spaces where i don't feel like I am under surveillance.

I want decision makers to be poor, sick and disabled, Queer and Trans People of colour.

I want the curators of museums and shows to be open minded to different aesthetics, not close minded and conservative; I want museums to stop shutting doors on people.

I want to be unapologetically wild.

I want a home where i feel comfortable and safe.

I want freedom to move.

I want people to understand that cultural theft is not essential to the creation of art.

I want children to be honoured and respected, protected and cherished, listened to and centred.

I want intra-generational movement-building.

I want to make my ancestors proud.

I want people to know i'm sick.

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I want you to know small is okay.

I want things to be simple.

I want to amplify marginalized voices.

I want body-shaming to cease to exist.

I want people to trust each other.

I want a world free of cops.

I want tenderness.

I want for sick people to not be seen as blueprints for how not to be in the world.

I want to unlearn shame.

I want racialized people to have time and space to fucking breathe and be in peace.

I want people to recognize my education.

I want medicine.

I want to be more than a body.

I want to process in my own way, on my own terms, in my own time.

I want to infiltrate.

I want people to understand i don't owe them anything.

I want time and space to rest.

I want to thrive and not be in survival mode all the time.

Considering the many critical demands that my workshop participants have disclosed in the six months that I have been leading For a New Accessibility, I can't help but recall something that Metis painter and curator David Garneau said as he and I were answering questions after our talk "Accessing the Museum" at the Ottawa Art Gallery in May 2016. While responding to the need for marginalized

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groups to have increased access to mainstream cultural platforms, David said that the idea of "opening space" to those who are marginalized is too passive of a response in a time when "what people need is help." At first, David's comment resonated with me on the basis that it described what is at the heart of my proposal for Open Access: the politics of offering support. But as I have been able to share the concept of Open Access with more people, I have come to realize the challenge that the seemingly simple idea of offering support poses.

Offering support requires us to listen, realize our privilege, redistribute our access, step aside, and let those who are seeking support lead the conversation about their own well-being. It requires us to acknowledge the disabling social and cultural conditions that the institutions that we are dedicated to enforce. It requires us to admit the injustice that we have perpetrated, or been complicit in, and then participate in reparation, reconciliation, and a radical restructuring of power. It requires the systems and practices that those in need rely upon to undergo radical change. My hope is that people will use the Open Access tenets to guide an assessment of the support-based relationships that they have a stake in, and employ them as a

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framework when the need for a support-based relationship, or
community, emerges. My hope is that Open Access can help guide some of
the challenging work ahead and transform accessibility into a cultural
practice that is central to the ways people relate to each other.

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