Reflections on the 2021-2022 Arts' Civic Impact Project

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Abstract: In this article, Aaron Richmond develops the foundations for an evaluation framework that has the potential to impact how notions of embodied accessibility in creative performance will work in the near future. Richmond focuses on the specificity of discourse and decision-making that enables the inclusion of various audiences, choreographers, and performers in the field of dance. In the process, Richmond thinks through a series of questions grounded in a field of study that first emerged upon noticing several recent Montreal-based dance projects aimed at making dance accessible for blind and low-vision communities. These questions include: What does accessibility look like when it doesn't look like anything? When, above all, it cannot be imagined as an interface of constraints neatly lifted and boxes suitably checked? What is an accessibility that accepts and defends the functional gains of earlier activists, while also setting new horizons for disability justice? Conducted between 2021-2023, this investigation enquires deeply into the discourses circulating around and through the actual production processes being observed. More specifically, the research brings critical disability studies into conversation with current forms of expression on the stage in more nuanced ways than have been previously investigated. What results is a framework that Richmond names Access in Counterpoint. The framework consists of five pairs of terms - each pair introducing a particular set of questions for those working in the field of accessible dance, and aiming to understand their own investment in impact, defined broadly. At first glance, these terms could be thought of as binaries or opposites, but as Richmond demonstrates in the concluding section of the article, these contrasting terms begin to trace out a spectrum of possibility: a way of thinking while doing in the field, in design, in development, in performance, and upon reflection.

Keywords: civic impact, accessibility, critical disability studies, impact framework, dance

Résumé : Dans cet article, Aaron Richmond développe les fondements d'un cadre d'évaluation qui pourrait influencer la manière dont les notions d'accessibilité incarnée dans les performances créatives fonctionneront dans un avenir proche. Richmond se concentre sur la spécificité du discours et de la prise de décision qui permet l'inclusion de divers publics, chorégraphes et interprètes dans le domaine de la danse. Dans ce processus, Richmond réfléchit à une série de questions ancrées dans un domaine d'étude qui a émergé en remarquant plusieurs projets de danse récents à Montréal visant à rendre la danse accessible aux communautés aveugles et malvoyantes. Ces questions comprennent : À quoi ressemble l'accessibilité quand elle ne ressemble à rien ? Quand, surtout, elle ne peut pas être imaginée comme une interface de contraintes soigneusement levées et des cases correctement cochées ? Qu'est-ce qu'une accessibilité qui accepte et défend les gains fonctionnels des premiers militants, tout en ouvrant de nouveaux horizons pour la justice en matière de handicap ? Réalisée entre 2021 et 2023, cette enquête examine en profondeur les discours qui circulent autour

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et à travers les processus de production observés. Plus précisément, la recherche met en dialogue les études critiques sur le handicap avec les formes actuelles d'expression sur scène, de manière plus nuancée qu'auparavant. Le résultat est un cadre que Richmond nomme "Access in Counterpoint". Ce cadre consiste en cinq paires de termes - chaque paire introduisant un ensemble particulier de questions pour ceux travaillant dans le domaine de la danse accessible, et visant à comprendre leur propre investissement dans l'impact, défini de manière large. À première vue, ces termes pourraient être considérés comme des binaires ou des opposés, mais comme Richmond le démontre dans la conclusion de l'article, ces termes contrastants commencent à tracer un spectre de possibilités : une manière de penser tout en agissant dans le domaine, dans la conception, le développement, la performance et la réflexion.

Mots clé : Impact civique, Accessibilité, Études critiques sur le handicap, Cadre d'impact, danse

Introduction

What does accessibility look like when it doesn't look like anything? When, above all, it cannot be imagined as an interface of constraints neatly lifted and boxes suitably checked? What is an accessibility that accepts and defends the functional gains of earlier activists, while also setting new horizons for disability justice?

These were the research questions that emerged in a three-way partnership between *Mass Culture*, *Montréal, art interculturels* and *Danse-Cité.* Over one year, I explored various creative initiatives aimed at making dance accessible for people with visual impairments. My interest was to think about how these dance projects enabled a rethinking of accessibility beyond its strictly logistical dimensions.

In what follows, I will describe the initial motivations for this research, its critical orientations, field of study and research methodology. I will then briefly explain the framework generated by the research and suggest possible avenues for further research within this field.

Motivations

From 2004 to 2015, I worked as a personal assistant for the artist, author and community educator Judith Snow (1949-2015). Judith is renowned for her activism in the late 1970s, when, as a person with quadriplegia, she fought the Ontario government for the right to manage her own personal care. With the support of family and friends, Judith became the first person in Canada to receive individualized funding - hiring and training her own personal staff of caregivers while supporting others to do the same.

I began working for Judith as an art student living in Toronto. Judith, then in her early 50s, had taken to joking that she had retired from a life of advocacy work, and now wanted to enjoy the fruits of her labour. After a long and arduous fight for "disability rights" (a set of terms she frequently disavowed), Judith determined to find in art a set of practices that assumed her participation.[i] I often

heard her say some version of the following: “I don’t want to spend my whole life fighting for a seat at the table; I want to see what happens once I am given that seat. I want to see what happens next.”

In the last decade of her life, Judith brought to creative practices the same fearlessness she had previously brought to community organizing. She surrounded herself with assistants who worked in the arts - often borrowing from the intimacy and trust developed in those relationships to find new pathways into collaboration. She acquired skills as a painter, developing a technique in which an assistant “tracker” followed a laser pointer attached to her headband. She co-created two theatre pieces in conversation with her assistant, Caleb Yong, and fellow theatre-makers Michael Rubenfeld and Sarah Garton Stanley. In each of these projects, Judith valued her own entry into the field of creative practices. She understood the unique ways she brought people together, and how experimentation – the kind allegedly sought by many of the artists in her company – was an integral practice in her daily life.[ii]

Working for Judith prepared the ground for many of the questions raised by this research project. Above all, Judith insisted that the work of inclusion extends beyond the framework of providing access.[iii] While the rubric of “special needs” had been used to make important gains in her agency and mobility, she also saw that this had come at a cost. And though she accepted that living with quadriplegia had granted her unique life experiences, she was tired of those who assumed these experiences to be fundamentally ‘lacking.’ I witnessed countless encounters in which Judith introduced strangers to the possibility of seeing her as something other than a ‘poor thing.’ In artmaking, I believe that Judith discovered a set of conversations that paid lip service to her disabilities. In these conversations, she found the starting point for mutual curiosity and meaningful collaboration. In developing this research project, I was motivated by the prospect of carrying forward this dimension of Judith’s life and work – locating and contributing to its momentum within a contemporary field of cultural practices.

Initial Questions

As one of five researchers hired under Mass Culture’s ‘Research in Residence’ program, my task was to understand how the arts contribute to civic society. In qualitative research conducted over the course of one year, our mandate was to create a conceptual framework that could make sense of art’s “impact” within society, while providing indicators that could make this impact legible, if not measurable, for the sector at large.

The subject of my PhD focused on the historical linkages between art, architecture and medicine. More specifically, I was assigned to think about the function of art as it pertains to questions of public health and well-being. Though innocuous at first, this area of focus very quickly became a liability once I was drawn into the field of critical disability studies - an area which owes much of its critical strength to its very resistance to the paternalisms of health care and its paradigms. From the very outset of this project, my chosen field of study challenged the epistemic models I brought to bear on it.

A field of study first emerged upon noticing several dance projects aimed at making dance accessible for blind and low-vision communities. In its 2021-2022 season, *Montréal, arts interculturels* hosted a series of production residencies investigating accessibility from within the earliest development of a work. Amongst these was Audrey-Anne Bouchard's "Camille: un rendez-vous au-delà du visuel," an immersive multi-sensorial narrative performance developed for a visually impaired audience. Later that same year, *Danse-Cité* launched a major pilot project in which the French choreographer Valerie Castan trained a cohort of 15 people to provide audio description for live dance performances.[iv] *Danse-Cité* not only trained people in developing live audio description; they also fostered dialogues between audio describers and choreographers, hosting a series of workshops for choreographers exploring dance beyond its visual dimensions.[v] In addition to these projects, I very quickly discovered several others, both regional and national, similarly engaging questions of accessibility in dance.

At the outset, I recognized two kinds of problems being raised within the field of accessible dance: one aesthetic (about the art of dance) and one political (about questions of social justice and inclusion). Regarding the aesthetic, I encountered multiple artists who were curious about the promises of thinking dance beyond its visual conventions. By removing or de-emphasizing sight as the privileged means of experiencing choreographic movement, the field of dance seemed to be opening to a radically new set of artistic forms. At the same time, however, these forms also carried the promise of a more inclusive society. Amongst many of the artists and organizational workers I encountered, there seemed to be an interest in how community access to the arts could be expanded by embedding questions of accessibility into the creative process itself. Thus, although I separate them here, the mixture of aesthetic and political concerns mutually informs one another. While artists are motivated to recognize and explore non-normative modalities of embodied experience, these horizons become newly available within a non-segregated sphere of cultural production. Likewise, the proximity of art to disability justice presents a new set of challenges for creatively re-engaging the sensorial thinking-feeling body.

Beyond this combination of political and aesthetic aspirations, I was interested in how the effort to 'think dance beyond the visual' enacted certain shifts in both discourse – 'how people communicate' and capacity - 'what people have and can do' (Americans for the Arts, 2017). It seemed that the creative projects I was observing demanded new concepts for thinking about access, spectatorship (or the act of beholding a work), and other choreographic experiences previously described through an ocular-centric framework of analysis.[vi] Amongst the artists and organizations I was following, I encountered the importance of language - words! – and either how they were used to articulate new promises, or had been newly problematized by recent critical perspectives. Words such as integration, intimacy, need, and care are all good examples of the concepts newly valorized and/or contested within contemporary conversations about access.

Beyond language, I was also interested in how many creative initiatives demanded new capacities in the sphere of production. These projects demanded new creative processes, new distributions of organizational labour, and new investments in audio description technologies; they also demanded new organizational partnerships, and new models of community engagement.

Making accessible dance requires that an institution re-learn how to welcome people into the spaces of its production, and once there, how to properly address a non-normative set of needs and desires.

When considered together, these shifts in discourse and capacity represent an emerging *praxis*: a field bringing new ideas and practices into the realm of choreographic production. Upon locating my research area within this field, I began to explore some possible entries into the problem of impact and civic value. I began by asking: What difference is made by this field of cultural practices? What is the collective 'good' they constitute? What is the civic 'value' they represent and for whom do they carry such value? Moreover, what are the techniques by which we might register this 'value,' both in what it does in the world, or in the scope of its future promises? In this last question, I found a first articulation of the problem of 'impact' in the arts.

Again, though innocuous at first, a brief literature review revealed just how fraught conversations around "impact assessment" can be. Beyond the disciplinary squabbles over qualitative vs. quantitative methodologies, the trouble I encountered within the "civic impact" discourse concerned the risk that it might further re-entrench discriminatory cultural politics. To put the matter crudely: questions of artistic value are traditionally framed as either intrinsic to individual aesthetic experience or as extrinsic and thus instrumental to some larger societal function - usually related to the economy, health care, *etc*. (Tiller, 2014). With this distinction comes an unwitting segregation of concerns: questions of artistic integrity (quality, merit, excellence) are reserved for a connoisseur, able-bodied, middle/upper class, whereas art's service to society is a conversation often ascribed to the socially disenfranchised and poor (Holden, 2004). Though often tacit, this segregation presumes that the socially marginalized don't really care (or have the capacity to care) about contemporary art; while inversely, it empties aesthetic experience of its intrinsically social dimensions - its power to disrupt, shift consciousness (Bishop 2023).

In conceptualizing impact and value, there is a further risk of reinforcing (neoliberal) cultural politics whereby what is good for the individual is cognitively dissociated from what is good for the collective (and vice versa). This dissociation has been noted in a tendency to assume the individual as a self-serving and hedonistic principle, with the social dimensions of culture having little to say about individual life (Throsby, 2001; Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016). For instance, one often-cited notion of value imagines the "interpersonal" as a space midway between the individual's private aesthetic experience and the social commitments that situate the individual within the larger community (Brown 2). While appealing for its clarity, politically I fear that this model reinforces the "reflective individual" as a solipsistic core that is, in its most authentic experiences of art, removed from collective life. Put simply: such models may prevent us from appreciating how our experience of artworks - whether as producers or consumers - are *in themselves* profoundly social.

Within the field of critical disability study, I found refreshing alternatives for thinking about the civic value of the arts. In what the author and educator Mia Mingus calls "access intimacy," for instance, I encountered a concept of value located on the threshold between individual and collective realities (Mingus, 2011). Where the "reflective individual" presumes an introspective isolated subject, intimacy imagines a subjective experience profoundly conditioned by the presence

of another. Moreover, by reading this experience through the lens of disability justice, Mingus acknowledges the tenuous circumstances through which intimacy must be won. "Access intimacy" presents a notion of inter-subjectivity that presumes the complication of countless barriers - ableist, racist, classist and otherwise - providing a helpful model for how one might think traditionally marginal concerns at the very center of our conversations concerning aesthetic impact. Disability justice becomes a helpful discourse for rethinking the value of art more generally.

The conversations that I was most drawn to situated questions of disability within the questions and concerns of working artists. The artist and scholar Arseli Dokumaci was particularly helpful in rethinking disability through the prism of "affordances" rather than needs (Dokumaci, 2017, p. 404). These affordances, Dokumaci says,

> are not yet another example of extraordinary human resilience. Instead, they are claims made towards collective living. They question the terms that we, as a public, have somehow come to agree upon about how we share our resources, infrastructures and systems of sustenance. They challenge the norms that mediate what our bodies can or cannot do, how they should be lived and perceived (Tembeck, 2015, ¶8).

Dokumaci draws attention to the small, often micro-logical ways in which people with disabilities are challenged to re-create their environments. There is, she claims, an inherently improvisatory nature to these micro-activisms enacted upon the status quo (Dokumaci, 2017).

Within the field of dance, a similar logic is pursued by the blind literary critic Piet Devos. Devos describes the novelties afforded by the desire to make dance accessible for people with visual impairment. At stake is not just a question of disability justice, but also, the creative investigation of how our bodies register movement in space. He writes:

> Whether through the auditory exploration of space and presence or the haptic appropriation of another's movement into one's own body, blindness brings along an intensely affective, sensory plenitude to the dance theatre, which is at odds with the formalism and distanced judgment typical of the more conventional, predominantly visual approach to dance. The result of such promising experiments within contemporary dance is the emergence of a more inclusive aesthetics in which the creative potential of sensory differences is no longer suppressed but ultimately acknowledged. (Devos, 2018, ¶1; also see Corker, 2001).

Together, what Dokumaci (2017) calls a creative affordance, and what Devos describes as the "creative potential of sensory difference" present a suggestive reframing of conversations linking disability and the arts. In their thinking, I found a helpful foothold for addressing the curiosity I repeatedly encountered among artists and community organizers. Amongst both, I sensed a recurring interest, not just in how working methods could be made inclusive, but also in what this

inclusivity would generate: new ways of working or thinking about gesture, temporality, narrative, etc. I began to understand this line of thinking as a current of "blind epistemology"; in other words, a tradition in critical disability study which approaches blindness not as a deficit but as a gain (Thompson, 2017) and as a way of knowing (Healey, 2019; Jones, 2016; Kleege, 2018; Michalko, 2002). Particularly trenchant for me within this tradition is Mary Bunch's notion of "blind visuality" (Bunch, 2021) – which she describes as "a political concept that challenges the socially constructed hierarchies that privilege vision and normative ways of seeing" (Bunch, 2021, p.240). With "blind visuality", Bunch dissociates visuality from ocular vision and reminds us of the various multi-sensorial and often tactile ways people with visual impairment cultivate imaginative, historically situated, modes of knowledge and experience. For my research, the notion of blind visuality helped locate an interesting nexus of curiosity around the question of how dance and choreography could be experienced without its historic emphasis on ocular vision. Put simply, many of the dance artists I encountered were exhausted by dance's conventional reliance on sight and spectacle, and they were seeking to ally themselves with conversations that had emerged within the field of disability arts. I saw a trend amongst contemporary dance artists wanting to re-learn their practices through an engagement with blind visuality.

Field of Research / Methodology

My research strategy was to combine auto-ethnographic observation and inclusive collaboration with participating members of the creative projects represented. From October 2021 to June 2022, I attended five accessible performances and seven working sessions organized by Danse Cité as part of the choreographer's workshop titled "Décloisonner la multi-sensorialité." I also conducted ten interviews with participants of various creative projects - attempting to draw out a cross-section of artists (4/10), audience members (2/10), audio describers (2/10), and other organizational supports (2/10). I attempted to engage a combination of blind (4/10), partially sighted (1/10) and fully sighted participants (5/10).

Most performances I attended were organized as part of Dance-Cité's pilot project offering audio description for dance. Though each was held at a different venue, and thus operated under a different set of institutional parameters, a common structure was often observed: an initial welcoming for audience members with visual impairments; a technical booth (provided by Connec-T) providing support for the Sennheiser phone app required for live audio description; a "touch-tour" introducing the performance space and its material props; an audio described introduction and program notes read multiple times in the half-hour leading up to the performance; the performance itself; and a follow-up discussion with the choreographer and/or the audio describers involved.

These performances were a testing ground for new institutional conventions. They formed and relied upon new partnerships between art organizations, an accessible tech firm, and public-reaching community organizations. These collaborations represent significant shifts in institutional capacity: they rely upon multiple levels of public arts funding, and represent massive reallocations

of money, time and labor. These performances also initiated new social exchanges - not least, between a predominantly sighted audience and those using audio descriptive technologies; and between those working at the collaborating venues and the organizational staff working to make them more accessible. To be sure, there were moments when these collaborations faltered. I recall a particularly cringeworthy situation during one of the first touch tours, when a stage manager patronized a room of variably sighted participants, clapping loudly and begging that they "*please*" mind a floor section of integrated lighting before 'kindly' making their way to the doors. More than once, I also left feedback sessions with the feeling that the conversation had only just begun. And yet, despite these occasional missteps, what these performances impressed upon me was the camaraderie amongst many of the blind and low-vision audience members present. I observed - as I would only later come to understand - an intimacy borne from an ongoing set of collaborations, conversations and workshops that had, by the time of the performances, been over a year in the making. Put simply: a community had begun to form around accessible dance in Montreal.

In my conversations with Maud Razo-Rothenbühler, Development and Communications Director at Danse-Cité, I learned that it had been a conscious aim of the pilot project to grow and sustain a blind and partially sighted audience for contemporary dance. Under the inclusivity mandate of the director Sophie Corriveau, they intended to offer a 'panorama' of artistic projects, in multiple venues, at various points throughout the year. Razo-Rothenbühler described the logistical challenges involved in making this possible. She stressed that, more than anything else, the project demanded a new set of communication strategies to engage blind or partially sighted audiences: informing people about new performances, arranging accessible transport, and being available by telephone (rather than email). Razo-Rothernbuhler described notable gaps in the sector's capacity on each of these fronts. She referred, for instance, to the predominantly visual "teasers" used by dance companies to advertise new works - suggesting that both time and money were needed to make such publicities accessible and to rethink the online networks in which they are currently circulated. "We often relied upon our partnerships with local organizations to spread the word about shows, or to invite participants to creative workshops," Razo-Rothenbühler says, but it's conceivable that dance company websites could be relied upon to provide their own accessible outreach."[vii] These limits notwithstanding, demand is growing, Razo-Rothenbühler concluded: "I receive ongoing expressions of interest in new work."

Beyond these logistical dimensions, I was interested in how the performances extended capacities more closely related to the medium of dance itself. Some shows played with how visitors were welcomed into a performance. For instance, in Audrey-Anne Bouchard's "Camille: The Story", visitors both sighted and non-sighted left belongings at the door and were led down a flight of stairs and into the performance space wearing slippers and blindfolds. Some performances experimented with how their audience was seated: in Emile Pineault's "More than Things", visitors could choose to sit on upright chairs, or lounge on cushions closer to the floor. For Laurie-Anne Langis' "Merging", each audience member was situated on its own embroidered textile, emphasizing the function of tactility in grounding us within the performance space. Above all, the experience of sound played a critical role in suggesting movement and materiality without recourse to the visual. While larger

venues sometimes struggled to integrate the soundtrack with the audio description - the latter often unable to match its intensity or volume - many of the projects I attended relied upon a heightened experience of sound to locate the choreography in space and time. Again, in Laurie Anne-Largis' piece, each beholder was equipped with wooden boxes that had been converted into transistor radios. Throughout the show, each of our tactile islands broadcasted a soundtrack that came and went in concert with the more analog sounds of bodies moving in the space between us.

In the examples cited above, what interests me is the way accessible dance produces new techniques for creating choreographic form. The partially sighted artist, Audrée-Anne Bouchard, described this process as requiring a new "dramaturgy of the senses" - sensitive to the intensities produced by each. "Any time we worked with touch," says Bouchard, "it was clear that the intensity was so strong that all other impressions were diminished. This told us that we had to be very selective in how and when we engaged our audience with each of the senses."

One of the participants in the *Danse Cité* project, the blind musician and social worker Denise Beaudry characterized the aesthetic problem as one of "creating new "fils conductors" (connective lines) traversing the work. Though these connective lines needn't be limited to narrative, I heard multiple participants voice a desire to follow a continuous thread. Beaudry aptly said the following during one of the workshop feedback sessions: "It is not interesting for me to have to guess whether the sounds I hear are intentional or not." I want to be sure that what I'm giving my attention to was intended for me!" This same problem was addressed by members of *All Bodies Dance* "Translations" project, a group of artists with mixed visual abilities. They noted a desire to create an environment where "the experience could happen without it being a puzzle that [blind audience members] are trying to figure out the whole time." The group developed a strategy for conveying simple movements in language and sound - and then gradually building these up into more complex configurations. As the blind artist and community consultant Collin Van Uchelen put it: "It was about layering the language with the sound of the body moving, the breath of the dancer and the movement of the air to create a new understanding of the dance." The resulting choreography was not strictly bound to the visual but rather moved between linguistic, aural, tactile, and proprioceptive dimensions. Or as the artist Carmen Papalia put it, the works developed a "sensory mobility" otherwise lacking in visually based media.

Similar questions of "sensory mobility" arose in the development of audio description - which raised its own set of promises and challenges. For its pilot project, Danse-Cité invited the French choreographer Valérie Castan to introduce a cohort of 15 participants to the art of live audio description for dance. In the first of the two-week-long training, participants were introduced to questions surrounding language use - thinking about the function of description, rhythm, diction, and syntax. The dancer and author Enora Rivière described a process whereby one layered the simplicity of actions - their "essential features" - with a second metaphorical layer, informed by the themes and associations observed in the work. "I begin with the action and move outward towards the necessary degree of nuance. Some shows are deadpan; while others are more elaborate - calling for language that is the same."

In their second week of training, the same 15 participants were taught to use their voices in pursuit of the work's musicality. Another audio describer, the dancer George-Nicholas Tremblay described his aim to create a "kinaesthetic empathy" as "a transmission of energy" conveyed in the work's rhythms. In the feedback sessions, blind participants often commented on quieter moments where audible movements and simple descriptions entered a delicate balance. This was particularly effective in Heather Mah's solo, *Pomegranate,* in which simple stage props and minimalist soundtrack often opened into quiet moments in which the audible movements of the dancer entered into a delicate exchange with the description itself: "She turns . . . turns . . . turns, and stops." The resonant impact of such moments was frequently palpable in the feedback sessions, where participants were often vocal in affirming one another's enthusiasm around the very same experiences.

Common to the projects I followed was a recognition that audio description represents a new and experimental field of practice. More than an established set of techniques that could be universally applied to live dance, many of the artists I spoke with described themselves as exploring how language entered the choreographic process itself. Naomi Brand, founder of All Bodies Dance, recounts the following about the Translations project:

The project began with the idea that the description and the dance would be created together, one in service of the other. In some of our first research sessions, we were overwhelmed by the infinite number of things that could be described about a moving body. Beyond all the possible adjectives and action words, we found ourselves grappling with questions such as: do we describe the person's clothing? Their skin colour? Their size? Their mobility device?...Without the scaffolding of a theatrical character or scripted lines to hang a description on, we were left to make choices about what we value most about the dances and dancers.

This comment raises a set of considerations which seem particularly relevant to contemporary debates surrounding audio descriptive practices. It suggests that, in addition to the sensory complexities involved in making dance accessible, there is also a question about which critical and conceptual frameworks are brought to the work. After one of the audio described performances, "L'effritement des parades" by Alan Lake Factori(e), I went home thinking about the sorts of conversations this piece would surely prompt amongst my sighted friends. Surely, we would process the piece not just formally, but also at the level of its gender and racial politics - asking questions about the kinds of dancing bodies that we had been watching, and the visual conventions by which their sexuality was conveyed. I thought: would this same dimension of criticism be accessible to those experiencing the work through audio description alone? And if not, what kinds of intervention would be needed to make this dimension of the work available?

Hannah Thompson, a partially blind academic and activist, addressed these emerging questions in her 2019 "Describing Diversity" project.[viii] Against the presumed mantras of neutrality embedded within a first generation of audio descriptive techniques, Thompson draws attention to the way a broader spectrum of human characteristics can be brought into play. She writes, "By exploring what is at stake in the description of normative and non-normative bodies, we will attempt to define what "ethical audio description" might look like and investigate how this new kind of social-justice-

inspired access model can and should work to foreground the paradoxical invisibility of unmarked normativities such as whiteness and non-disability" (Thompson, 2022, n.p).

Though cursory, I conclude with Thompson to underscore the broad field of considerations currently at play within accessible dance. The field of contemporary dance is broad and varied. It often relies upon deeply entrenched visual languages regarding the kinds of bodies that are seen, and how they are seen. Making dance accessible has the capacity to interrupt these visual codes, presenting a more global challenge both to the aesthetics of dance and to the critical and conceptual paradigms by which they are developed.

Access in Counterpoint

Under the terms of the Research in Residence project, our research aimed to develop a conceptual *framework* addressing the civic impact of the arts. Though elusive at first, I eventually came to understand the intended outcome of such a framework: By situating ourselves within our respective corners of the arts sector, we were meant to create a tool that could help to guide future work being done within the arts. However, where my own project was unfolding - at the intersection of disability justice and the performing arts - I quickly encountered two kinds of resistance to this proposed outcome.

First, from the field of participants I engaged, and from the field of critical disability study more broadly, I quickly discovered fatigue with research that presented itself in the form of policy guidelines. I repeatedly encountered the same specter: a version of accessibility reduced to a set of boxes one simply checked off, whether as an artist or institution. It was the very neatness of such frameworks that seemed to reinforce the kinds of tokenism, or disengaged correctness, that contemporary disability justice discourse aimed to transcend. There was something about the possibility of "checking boxes" that allowed the arts sector to avoid tarrying with the productive discomforts made plain by advocates of disability justice.[ix]

A second related difficulty I encountered with producing a framework had to do with my relative lack of experience within the field. I was, and am still, aware that both theoretically and practically speaking, my experience in this field of practice is relatively limited. I encountered these limitations within the field of research but also among friends and family. My aunt, Susie Mittelman-Sokol, has been a disability activist and community organizer for over thirty years: tirelessly attending and leading weekly programs, building accessible institutions, and advocating for resources on behalf of youth and young adults with intellectual disabilities in Ontario. When embarking on this research, I repeatedly asked myself what tools I could possibly provide her after only one year of working within the field.

From these various resistances, I began to imagine a framework that could speak to the introductory nature of my research. I asked: What would it mean to describe accessible dance, not as an expert, but as someone newly engaging in its shifting field of practice? Similarly, I began to imagine a kind of framework that would not present itself as a definitive mapping of a static state

of affairs, but rather, offer some terms for navigating its current complexities. “Access in counterpoint” emerged as a model that could satisfy both demands.

To me, the concept of counterpoint suggests an interplay of elements, in movement and contrast. This model was helpful to me insofar as it allowed me to address some of the central tensions I encountered throughout my research. It challenged me to name the different areas in which I found the field of accessibility arts to be particularly contentious or productively dynamic: the areas where accessible dance raised the most questions or generated the most excitement, anxiety and debate.

My framework*, Access in Counterpoint,* consists of five pairs of terms - each of which introduces a particular set of problems within the field of accessible dance. Though at times these terms are conceived as opposites, my intention was by no means to present a simple set of binary choices. On the contrary, my intention was to use these contrasting terms to suggest a spectrum of possible questions: questions that, from my experience, people are asking within the field of accessible dance. They are Production-Reception; Functional-Aesthetic; Need-Affordance; Capacity-Adequacy; and Integration-Intimacy. In what follows, I will briefly sketch out each of these pairs.

Creation / Reception

With this pair, I wanted to introduce a first basic distinction that I encountered amongst ambitions brought to the field of accessible dance: Is one interested in the experience of a potential audience member? Or in the artistic conditions for creating new work? Does one want to engage in a more inclusive public sphere? Or is one interested in new models of collaboration, curation, and engagement? As with all the contrasting terms that follow, it is often difficult to think of one set of these questions without implicating the other. Indeed, many inclusive dance projects have attempted to expand their impact on a future audience precisely by rethinking their approaches on the side of artistic production. These subtleties notwithstanding, I consider the basic difference to be helpful for the following reason: it reminds us that the desire for an inclusive arts sector is always embedded in larger socio-economic dynamics. Before the many nuances surrounding accessible approaches to artmaking, spatial design, communication, etc., accessibility is a question about who makes what for whom, and under what conditions.

Functional / Aesthetic

With this pair of terms, I wanted to confront the way questions about accessibility often only suggest the functional or logistical dimensions of providing access. What comes to mind is often the challenge of removing physical barriers to the built environment, with the wheelchair ramp serving as a classic marker of institutional awareness. Such logistical considerations acquire new levels of complexity when faced with artistic programming. The field of contemporary art relies upon ever-changing audio-visual formats and technologies and is now frequently reliant upon online channels of communication. To make accessible dance involves a set of logistical considerations that is ever-changing.

However, in addition to these more functional dimensions of accessibility, there is also a set of questions conceived with reference to specific works of art. With each creative project, we might ask: What does it mean to be included in a community that shares in a collective sensory experience? Or put differently: what does access mean at the level of the aesthetic? The field of dance for blind and low-vision communities is a particularly experimental domain for asking this question. Through a range of audio descriptive and multi-sensorial techniques, dance artists are asking questions not just about how we bring people into a physical space, but also about how they might share in a creative project - with all the somatic and conceptual nuances that it might afford.

Need / Affordance

In this set of terms, I wanted to address how both practices and conversations centered around accessibility raised complex historical issues around the very meaning of disability itself. My sense is that in the late twentieth century, a needs-based paradigm framed advocacy work around the limitations of persons with disabilities in accessing basic civil rights. While these efforts continue to effect important changes, subsequent incarnations of disability justice work have argued that a needs-based approach often reinforces ableist hierarchies of power: the disabled are defined by a lack, for which they need the patronage of able-bodied medicine and its partners (the arts sector included).

To shift these dynamics, artists, activists and thinkers have proposed critical models which attribute greater agency and respect to the embodied experiences of those previously labelled with a disability. The critical disability scholar Arseli Dokumaci speaks of the “affordances” of people living with disabilities - respecting the innovations and improvisations produced by their non-compliance with normative modes of behavior. Similarly, the authors Piet Devos and Hannah Thompson have both attempted to re-think “visual impairment” not as a lack but as a “gain” (Devos, 2018; Thompson, 2017). In so doing, they draw attention to alternative forms of knowledge and sensibility that emerge from diverse somatic experiences.

Capacity / Adequacy

With this pair of terms, I wanted to introduce how postcolonial critique has problematized previous conversations around civic impact in the arts. Notions of “capacity building” are often used when thinking about accessibility at the scale of civic society. If one wants to describe how a particular community increases its available resources for people with visual impairment, capacity neatly encompasses ‘what people have and can do’ (Americans for the Arts, 2017) in ways that can include both the creative and logistical dimensions of arts programming.

However, postcolonial criticism suggests that the notion of “capacity” too often assumes growth as an unquestionable aim to be pursued. Again, capacity often means “capacity building” - an enterprise that Indigenous thinker Elwood Jimmy (2019) describes as an unconscious habit of settler-colonial expansionism. Alternatively, Jimmy proposes that we might think less about capacity

and more about adequacy, asking what set of conditions are *adequate* to the needs defined by each community at any given moment.

Integration/Intimacy

Finally, I conclude with a set of terms addressing accessible dance as a set of conversations and practices concerned with human relationships. The concepts and models which inform the projects I encountered each carry a different set of orientations. Within the performing arts, ideals around inclusivity have provided a framework for building creative communities that do not discriminate based on physical or mental abilities. From this, the notion of "integration" emerged as a way of describing a performing arts company that is inclusive in its cast. However, as languages of inclusion fall under greater scrutiny, many in the crip and disability justice movements have challenged the implications of "integration" as a model for relationality. Integration, some suggest, is a model which assumes the subordination of marginal differences into a normative center.

The notion of intimacy thus provides a critical counterpoint to the notion of integration. Mia Mingus' notion of "access intimacy" provides a model of relationality that does not paper over the often difficult or awkward processes of being in the company of difference. Moreover, intimacy provides a model of relationship that cannot be reduced to a set of policy guidelines that can be neatly checked. Intimacy is a radically contextual and relational model that pays attention to the embodied feelings of all participants involved and to the fragilities of interpersonal trust.

Conclusion

In the follow-up to the research in residency project, we researchers have been tasked with thinking about what comes next. How does our analysis translate into useful tools for the arts sector in Canada and abroad? How does our knowledge get "mobilized" into new networks, conversations, and practices?

Again, though new to the field, my feeling is that those "thinking dance beyond the visual" - and by extension, those engaged in broader conversations around accessibility in the arts - would benefit from greater exposure to one another. In my interviews, I was frequently amazed by points of coherence between projects that were completely unaware of one another. Or, just as often, I encountered projects exploring similar problems within accessible dance, but within completely different artistic and/or political paradigms. Again, some artists spoke about their aspirations to expand a more inclusive public audience for contemporary dance. For others, the horizon of disability justice is about representation within institutions: from the artists making the work to the board members holding voting rights within the relevant organizations. Though these aspirations are not mutually exclusive, they do imply different allocations of time and energy. They help us to imagine a wholly different set of practices and conversations.

Which then, I would ask, are the vehicles by which we might generate greater networks of exposure and conversation within the field of accessible arts? And what is the imagined relationship between these networks and those existing within the normative organizational structures? If one

of the strengths of contemporary accessible dance is its mutual applicability to artists working at all points of the able-bodied-disability spectrum, how do we avoid further ghettoizing disability arts into its own set of conversations? How does our research enable community and solidarity amongst the various practitioners, organizations and publics served by the development of accessible dance?

With *Access in Counterpoint,* my interest has been to gesture towards a form of embedded research that is attuned to emergent curiosities, and that treats conflicting ideas and values as footholds for further conversation. Again, the perspective I offer is not that of an expert, but of someone newly engaging in a field of practices. I am a nondisabled, sighted artist and scholar, guided by a variety of interests, intuitions and commitments. And while not all of these are fully transparent to me, one conviction remains clear: an engagement with blindness helps us to work beyond (or perhaps simply beside) many of the tedious habits of perception acquired in artistic craft and connoisseurship. I am often reminded of how Mary Bunch describes blind visuality as "an analytic that embodies as well as reflects an ethics of non-mastery. . . of knowing by yielding, by respectfully being-in-relation with others" (Bunch, 2021, p.241). This aptly describes the various artists and organizers I saw stepping into a field of practices for which there are no pre-written codes of conduct. It also aptly describes efforts I encountered to find artistic value outside of the usual mechanisms for judging merit and excellence. In a moment which seems so desperately committed to reducing experiences to Instagram snapshots, stories to headlines, and durational performances to spectacular imagery, my interest continues to follow a current in accessible dance that remains committed to the nuances of the moving body.

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[i] I sense that Judith's disavowal of disability rights had to do with its tendency to operate through litigation and the formation of bureaucratic service providers. For instance, while Judith was amongst the first in Canada to win the right to manage her own personal support staff, she often came into conflict with the agencies set up to guarantee that right. By contrast, the kind of community organizing she thrived on found solidarity amongst anti-capitalist and anti-racism movements. In this commitment to cross-movement organizing, she seemed to embody a second wave of disability activism – more in line with the rubric of disability justice. For a summary of this distinction, see Patty Berne, "Disability Justice: A Working Draft by Patty Berne." https://www.sinsinvalid.org/blog/disability-justice-a-working-draft-by-patty-berne

[ii] For a related discussion of improvisation, see: Dokumaci, Arseli. 2023. *Activist Affordances: How Disabled People Improvise More Habitable Worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press.

[iii] Judith often oriented away from accessibility towards inclusion – claiming that the latter addressed a spectrum of human differences, without singling out the needs of a marginalized community of people labelled by a disability.

[iv] Audio description is often defined as the verbal description of the essential visual aspects of an artwork. While popularized in film, its uses in live dance performance are a recent phenomenon – posing new questions and challenges. Danse-Cité's mandate to develop audio description for dance can be found here: https://danse-cite.org/en/accessibilite/about

[v] Organized with the Montreal based choreographer Emile Pineault, these choreographers included Lucy Fandel, Laurie-Anne Langis, Lucy May and Catherine Lavoie-Marcus.

[vi] For helpful discussions of ocular-centrism in the arts, see Kleege, Georgina. 2018. More Than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art. New York: Oxford University Press.

[vii] For example, Razo-Rothenbühler referred to her ongoing collaborations with "Le Regroupement des aveugles et amblyopes du Québec" (RAAQ).

[viii] This project examined how diverse human characteristics could be described in audio introductions used by theatre audio describers when, prior to the play, they introduce blind and partially sighted audience people to a play's characters.

[ix] From my conversations on this theme, such tokenism is often ascribed to a lack of institutional commitment in time and resources. It is easier for an organization to align itself with clearly established policies and protocols than it is to engage in an ongoing set of conversations. This distinction is helpfully articulated in Carmen Papalia's Open Access manifesto. Papalia writes: "Accessibility often refers to the disability community and these considerations are engaged through policies and enforcement. This creates dynamics between people—like recipients of support and providers—that don't lead to long-term mutual relationships, which I think are a key part of support that works, and support that can change and evolve over time." Carmen Papalia, "An Accessibility Manifesto for the Arts," Jan 2, 2018, Canadian Art, https://canadianart.ca/essays/access-revived/

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