Art in America
October 2022

Our Work Is Working

By Emily Watlington

Demonstrators advocating for disability rights in a still from the Netflix film *Crip Camp* (2020). Photo Betty Medsger/Courtesy Netflix.

Art has played an integral—maybe even primary—role in the burgeoning movement for disability justice throughout the United States in the last decade. In memoirs, paintings and drawings, sculptures, installations, videos, and live performances, and in venues ranging from small galleries to movie theaters to professional sports arenas, disabled artists have shared their myriad perspectives on life, again and again. With persistence, these works have begun to chip away at the ableist beliefs that structure disability oppression, and we are beginning to see hints of the effects as the cultural tides turn.

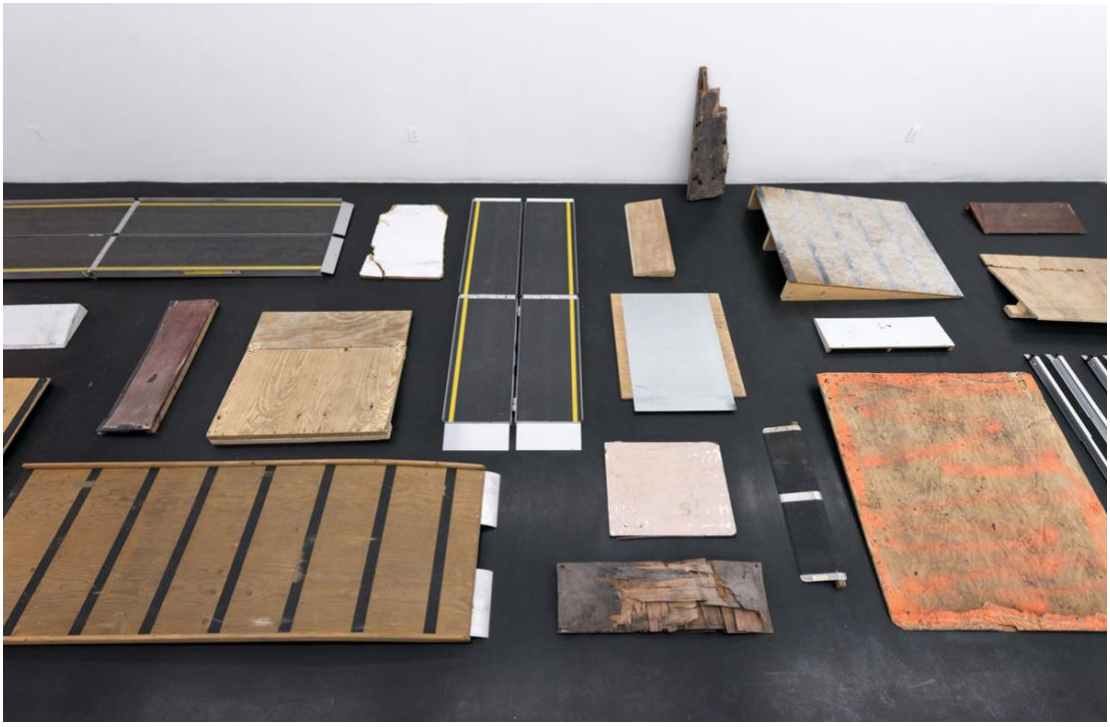
In Hollywood, for instance, a pattern has been disrupted: for decades, it was said that, when a nondisabled actor was cast as a disabled character in a story centered around overcoming—Tom Hanks as Forrest Gump, Eddie Redmayne as Stephen Hawking—they could all but count on an Academy Award. But in 2021, the award for Best Supporting Actor went to Deaf actor Troy Kotsur for his work in *CODA*, a movie about children of Deaf adults that also took home Best Picture. And in 2020, *Crip Camp*—a film made by a team of disabled activists—won Best Documentary. That same year, a Deaf artist, Christine Sun Kim, performed the national anthem in American Sign Language at the Super Bowl.

Disability-related concerns have long been written off as too niche, as affecting too few people, to deserve the limelight. But through cross-disability solidarity, artists and activists have formed myriad coalitions, following trails blazed by crip elders too numerous to name. With art as a primary weapon, they have demanded that their stories and perspectives infiltrate and change a culture riddled with ableist norms.

Artists have done this in three main ways. Some choose to narrate first-person experiences. Such works, often among the most visible and celebrated, help disabled audiences feel seen, or clue nondisabled audiences into perspectives they might not otherwise consider. Other artists have modeled, experimented with, or advocated for various forms of accessibility. Refuting the idea that

anything could be one-size-fits-all or that access is a set of infallible rules to be complied with, they foster a spirit of creative adaptability that ought to be central to accommodation. And still others show how impairment can be a generative, creative force, that disability doesn't need to be thought of as a lack or deficit. Instead, impairment demands that we rethink numerous norms and, in turn, open up new possibilities.

Many disabled people were raised with the idea that it is shameful to identify as disabled, and so were encouraged to hide their differences. (Here and throughout, I refer to the American context, with which I am most familiar—these cultural, political, and institutional norms may vary abroad.) This often has the effect of cutting disabled people off from one another, preventing them from forming a community. But against this, a growing group of artists has found each other and formed a culture and a coalition.

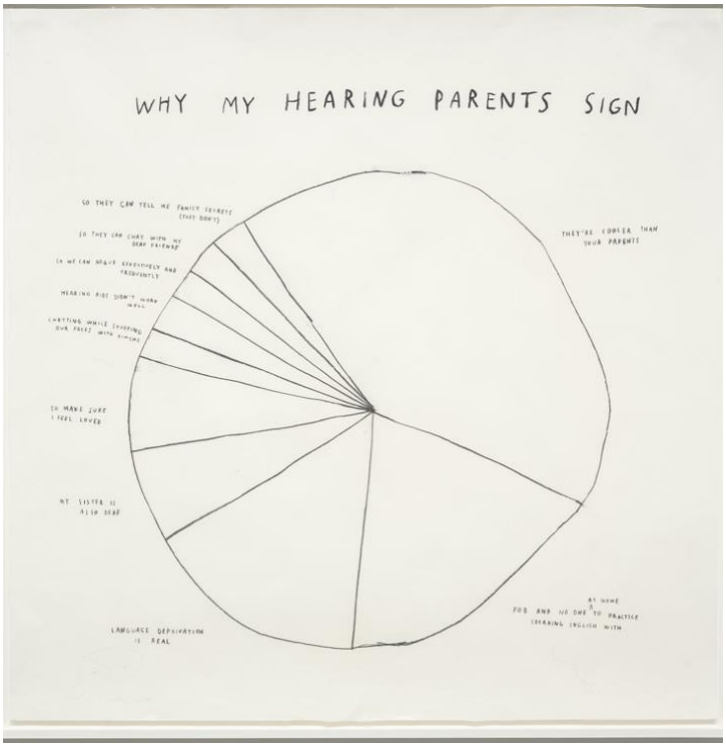


View of Park McArthur's installation *Ramps*, 2014. Courtesy Maxwell Graham / Essex Street, New York.

Our society has long been starved of first-person disability narratives, so it is not surprising that autobiographical works have been met with unusual fanfare. At the 2019 Whitney Biennial, Christine Sun Kim showed a series of pie charts drawn in charcoal: *Why My Hearing Parents Sign* (2019) includes slices that read TO MAKE SURE I FEEL LOVED and CHATTING WHILE STUFFING OUR FACES WITH KIM CHI. *Shit Hearing People Say to Me* features PRAY TO MY GOD AND HE WILL MAKE YOU HEAR and MY NEIGHBOR'S DOG IS DEAF, YOU TWO SHOULD MEET! As with snapshots from anyone's daily life, the charts oscillate between moments that are hilarious, infuriating, and tender. Kim is mindful of making work that speaks to Deaf and hearing audiences at the same time, and some of the shit people say to her will be familiar to people with other disabilities—like YOU'RE SMART FOR A DEAF PERSON, a reminder of the low expectations many disabled people face—while other quips are specific to Deaf culture (ASL IS SO EXPRESSIVE, SO EMOTIONAL, IT'S LIKE YOU'RE PERFORMING). Some of the moments Kim captures are more specific to her, like a pie slice in *Why My Hearing Daughter Signs* (2019) that reads MY SISTER IS ALSO DEAF.

An autobiographical current likewise runs through Park McArthur's 2014 exhibition *Ramps*, a galvanizing show that made people in the art world aware of how long, and how thoroughly, they had overlooked disability and accessibility. At the Lower Manhattan gallery Essex Street, McArthur displayed ramps that various art institutions had improvised. Many of them—opened before the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act required ramps in public spaces—were inaccessible because their entryways sat above street level, so their staffs came up with makeshift solutions. The resulting ramps employed unlikely materials ranging from laminated cardboard to a cabinet door.

Kim and McArthur focus on everyday acts of accommodation and care, cluing in audiences who are curious—or who have never thought about—how things work in the daily lives of disabled people, while also creating work that disabled audiences can identify with. But they do so in strikingly different ways: Kim's message, written in all caps, is unmistakably clear and direct. McArthur's is more oblique. It is easy to misidentify her unlikely ramps, and the main clue (besides the show's title) was a link inscribed on the gallery wall to a Wikipedia page the artist created for activist Marta Russell, the author of *Beyond Ramps: Disability at the End of the Social Contract* (2002). In her work, McArthur often embraces the position of the overlooked. Together, the two artists address the twinned importance of representing everyday experiences of disability and of offering protection from the probing, patronizing, ableist responses that inevitably arise when viewers first encounter accessibility.



Christine Sun Kim: *Why My Hearing Parents Sign*, 2019.
Charcoal and oil pastel on paper, 49¼ inches square. Courtesy François Ghebaly Gallery.

Offering autobiographical perspectives from diverse, often overlooked individuals and groups seems to be a major approach in art today. Importantly, McArthur and Kim speak to specific experiences of disability, rather than disability in general. (It's also notable that identity functions differently in the realm of disability than it does in other categories, since anyone can become disabled, suddenly or with age, permanently or temporarily. Yet this does not mean that every potentially disabled person is aligned with disability justice, nor that all experiences can be collapsed.) In their *Scores for…* series of videos and text-based works, McArthur, Constantina Zavitsanos, and Carolyn Lazard narrate customized care routines that they undertake for themselves and one another. Together, these works push back against a uniform approach to accommodation, as well as a sweepingly homogeneous conception of disability. Their take reminds us of one of the key lessons born of cross-disability community: no one can anticipate every access need of every person without asking, because we are all different. This means it is important to check in, remain open to feedback, stay flexible, and get comfortable talking about bodies and vulnerabilities. Cross-disability solidarity involves making space where we can speak about our different—and at times, conflicting—access needs. After all, faulty or overly broad generalizations about disabled people are often at the root of ableist notions, whether it's the conflation of one's physical disability with one's cognitive capacities, or the equation of one's disability with a "tragedy" that must be "overcome."


View of Carolyn Lazard's installation *Red*, 2021, in "Greater New York" at MoMA PS1, New York.
Photo: Marissa Alper.

Another main tenet of disability justice is that disability is produced not only by nonnormative bodies but also by disabling barriers. Ours is a society filled with inflexible structural designs that make narrow assumptions about bodies, how they are shaped, and what they can do. This precludes the flexible adaptability that accommodation requires. Fortunately, as the scholar Aimi Hamraie details elsewhere in this issue, designers of many stripes are now innovating responses to a wide range of access needs.

Meanwhile, many disabled artists create works that model the flexible spirit at the heart of access. These works often draw attention, gently or boldly, to the structural absence of access. Sometimes they offer solutions that double as provocations; other times, to quote writer and artist Amalle Dublon, they treat access as their "primary material." Shannon Finnegan, for example, critiques the lack of seating in museum exhibitions through a set of thought-provoking benches. Though Finnegan responds to each site differently, their seats are typically blue and inscribed with white text in the artist's signature handwriting. An early example, fabricated in 2018, was a bench that reads THIS EXHIBITION HAS ASKED ME TO STAND FOR TOO LONG. SIT IF YOU AGREE. In group exhibitions, Finnegan might install seating in front of a video work, where, preposterously, visitors are often asked to stand for 20 minutes or more.

A bench from Shannon Finnegan's series "Do you want us here or not (MMK)," 2021, MDO and paint. On view in *Crip Time*, 2021–22, at MMK, Frankfurt. Photo: Axel Schneider

In the 2021 exhibition *Crip Time* at the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt am Main, which brought together many of the artists in this essay as well as several German practitioners, Finnegan turned sets of inaccessible stairs that lead to balconies overlooking the atrium of the Hans Hollein-designed building into places of rest by fitting them with blue cushions and an arm rest that made them seats. This work, titled *The only thing I like about stairs is that they can be used as a place to sit in a pinch*, calls attention to a problem while solving it, and simultaneously invites viewers to participate in a protest—one challenging the notion that resistance always takes the form of fist raising or marching in the streets rather than, say, sitting in repose.

Yet the bulk of work that takes access as its primary material is audiovisual. This is for two reasons: first, because it's easier for artists to tinker with norms in sound and image than it is with hard and expensive infrastructure like architecture; second, because experimenting with forms widely used in the internet age helps draw attention to the responsibility we all share for making things accessible. Among these works are Lazard's flicker film *Red* (2021), shown in the 2021 edition of *Greater New York* at MoMA PS1. Examples of such films by Tony Conrad and Paul Sharits are hallmarks in the history of the moving image, yet because they fill dark theaters with stroboscopic flashes when shown as intended on projectors, they are inherently inaccessible to some viewers. So when Lazard called me—a strobe-sensitive cinephile—to discuss the possibility of making an accessible version, I was quite excited that I might get to see this thing I'd heard so much about, and could imagine, but had never experienced. In the resulting work, Lazard places their finger over the lens and then removes it repeatedly. Inside and outside the screening room, another screen alerts viewers when the speed will increase enough to create a stroboscopic effect. Lazard's was the first strobe warning I've ever seen that didn't just ask me to leave, but also told me when I could come back.

Plenty of other accessible videos use closed captions and audio description—intended for Deaf and blind viewers, respectively—not as add-ons or afterthoughts, but as integral parts of the work. In Jordan Lord's *After… After… (Access)*, 2018, a 15-minute video

about the artist's open-heart surgery, captions cover an image some viewers might find too graphic. Alex Dolores Salerno's *El Dios Acostado* (The Sleeping God), 2020, an 11-minute piece about an Ecuadorean town that is becoming gentrified as North Americans learn of its supposedly high concentration of centenarians, is set to what the artist calls a "pace of rest." Rather than squish audio descriptions between moments of dialogue, Salerno folds them into the narration, then repeats them in English and in Spanish, implicitly asking why accessibility features should be bent around exclusionary standards rather than allowed to transform the entire premise.

All these artworks model a kind of care for their audiences, and manifest an adaptable spirit that treats accommodation as an ongoing negotiation, rather than a one-sided relationship. The projects bear little resemblance to other forms of political art, like didactic video essays or social practice. They are directed at ableist attitudes and material changes at the same time, since when it comes to access, these are one and the same. And, since we all share a responsibility regarding access, the imperatives are clearly actionable. They also take advantage of the sorts of things art is good at in their focus on dreaming of better worlds by experimenting with form. Throughout history, impairment has been a creative force that demands we rethink arbitrary norms. Alexander Graham Bell's invention of the telephone was rather incidental: he was (not unproblematically) trying to create a tool that might enable his Deaf mother and wife to communicate as a hearing person would. The curb cuts that abound on sidewalk corners, where they are enjoyed by stroller pushers, bicycle walkers, and suitcase draggers, were brought to us by disabled activists who smashed pavement with sledgehammers. These acts of innovation—what media historian Mara Mills calls "assistive pretexts"—are often forgotten as an invention becomes useful (and profitable) to nondisabled populations, but they show how impairment has long been at the heart of creativity. Refusing to relegate this creative force to historical footnotes or have its fruits be made "universal," a number of disabled artists actively celebrate their unique bodies and ways of doing things.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the work of disabled dancers. The Kinetic Light ensemble not only creates choreography customized for the bodies of its principal dancers—featuring wheelchair users suspended from bungee cords or gliding down custom-built ramps—the group also creates work intended for disabled audiences. Performances include audio descriptions, often on several tracks ranging from artful to matter-of-fact, allowing audience members to choose from an array of narrations—along with haptic versions of the music. When the troupe's most recent performance, *Wired*, had its New York premiere at The Shed this past summer, it brought together many of the artists and writers included in this issue of *A.i.A.*, treating them in a way that many said made them feel not merely accommodated but cared for and celebrated. Kinetic Light allows disability to transform everything about the working process and the product.

Kinetic Light's performance *Wired*, 2022. Photo: Heather Cromartie.

Impairment is celebrated as a creative force in the visual arts too. It has driven much art history—from the "bad vision" of the Impressionists to Frida Kahlo's probing self-portraits—but for a new generation of artists, harnessing this potential is decidedly political. Emilie L. Gossiaux, for instance, has rethought the process of drawing from a blind perspective, relying on memory or on touching her subject and using materials—ballpoint pen and crayon—that leave tactile marks on the page. Many Deaf artists advocate changing the term "hearing loss" into "Deaf gain." Regarding her installation at Kunsthalle Osnabrück, for instance, artist Alison O'Daniel points out that hearing people seldom "think about sound in as profound and imaginative ways as Deaf and Hard

of Hearing people must." To make the point, she responded to the beguiling acoustics of the former German church. The nave was originally designed to amplify the voices of a priest and choir, projected from a pulpit and a choir loft, respectively. With those features now removed, today's visitors, walking where pews once sat, can expect a clap or a comment to practically evaporate into thin air. When O'Daniel, who is hard of hearing, visited the space, she felt it accurately re-created her daily auditory experience. She invited Deaf residents of the town to map the diverse ways they experienced sound traveling, then vanishing, in the space. Then, she plotted their maps on a colorful, cacophonous carpet, inviting visitors to share their auditory attentiveness as they explored the Kunsthalle.

If it's frustrating for these artists to have to explain disability justice again and again, explicitly or indirectly, it's downright demoralizing to have to remind people that our existence matters, and that we are capable of doing amazing things. Still, it's clear that the implicit reminders in these works remain powerful. And there are signs of a shift: for instance, all this year's major -ennials included at least one disabled artist. Some inclusions felt tokenizing or otherwise missed the mark: for instance, at the FRONT Triennial in Cleveland, there was a piece of fabric on which a wheelchair user, or perhaps several users, rolled their wheels in paint—a kind of crip action painting. However, the work was credited simply to the Art Therapy Studio, founded in 1967, and the actual artist(s) went unnamed. At Documenta, a British collective called Project Art Works likewise used disabled people who go unnamed and uncredited as part of their artistic process. The collective showed videos of themselves working with visibly disabled artists alongside the artworks, and it's unclear how much agency the latter have in the creative process.

View of Alison O'Daniel's installation *What We Feel When We Hear*, 2021, carpet and speakers. Kunsthalle Osnabrück. Photo: Lucie Marsmann.

Ableism and inaccessibility never come as a surprise in the art world. But rather than call out endless negative examples, I prefer to spend my effort celebrating all that disabled artists do—much as they, in their work, are crafting new narratives rather than critiquing dominant ableist ones. By now, we've given the world enough of our stories, our perspectives, our art, and our culture—even detailed practical guidelines—to move beyond representational support and tokenizing inclusions, and toward material change.

Slowly but surely we are seeing better accessibility. The most recent global roundups all included accessibility efforts that are unprecedented at such a scale, though many of the decisions were perplexing. At the FRONT Triennial, one venue, Transformer Station, had wall labels printed in braille—others did not—yet none of the venues provided descriptions of the artworks, which meant blind visitors could learn about some works' materials, dimensions, and lenders, but not what they looked like. At Documenta, the labels were hung at differing heights; rather than demonstrating consideration for wheelchair users and ambulatory visitors alike, they appeared to be placed haphazardly, at random levels, at times requiring elderly visitors to bend or squat uncomfortably. Meanwhile, the only material that explained things in plain language for neurodivergent visitors was also the only large-print booklet, a gesture that oddly lumped together the visually and cognitively impaired.

It is worth noting these two international exhibitions among umpteen others because they demonstrate that curatorial teams are now aware both that disability arts are essential and that accessibility matters: such artworks and such accommodations are being considered at a scale that, just 10 years ago, I would not have dreamed possible. At the same time, it is also clear that these choices were not made in consultation with the disability community. Somehow, in spite of the founts of knowledge and creativity I touched on above, we are still frequently treated as objects of charity. While many believe it can be harmful to speak or make decisions on behalf of an experience or identity one does not share, disabled people are still wrongly perceived as incapable of self-determination—sometimes, by the very people trying to be our allies. And so, as the art world signs itself up for disability studies 102 despite having dozed off during the prerequisite, I repeat a decades-old crip rallying cry: nothing about us without us. Our work is working, and there's a lot more to be done.