

BOMB

Cross-Disability Solidarity: Shannon Finnegan and Bojana Coklyat Interviewed by Amelia Rina

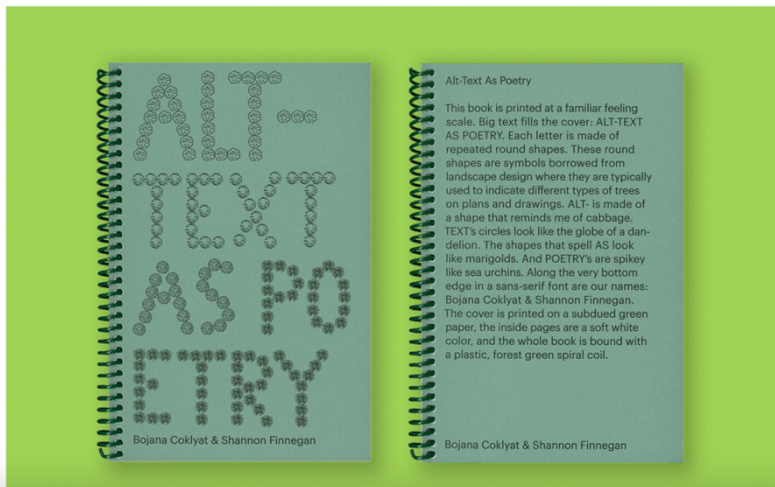
A project for resource sharing, discussion, and collaboration about creative approaches to image description.

In 2020, Instagram users uploaded 347,222 stories every minute. In those sixty seconds, Facebook users uploaded 147,000 photos, and Zoom hosted 208,333 participants in virtual meetings. After a year of mostly interacting with people through mediated digital encounters like video chat, social media, and email, companies of all sizes are failing to adequately consider their user's needs and experiences.

Imagine having someone read an article to you, and when she got to an image, she provided a description like: "Still from SOPHIE's 2018 video *Faceshopping*, directed by SOPHIE and Aaron Chan," "House On Cannonball Street Rachelle Dang2," "At the Shed, people who came for a concert by Kelsey Lu avoided the lobby and entered from doors leading directly into the McCourt space," or simply "Pierre Seinturier." These are alt texts taken from articles published in *Artforum*, BOMB, and the *New York Times*. Other magazines didn't have alt text embedded in their images at all.

Though the institutionalized art world has long perpetuated an ocular-centric model, art, like the human experience it tries to describe, engages all our senses. Artists Shannon Finnegan and Bojana Coklyat have been working toward a more thoughtful and inclusive internet by demonstrating the beauty and accessibility of describing images. In their book, *Alt-Text as Poetry*, and throughout their online resources, workshops, and broader ecosystem under the same name, Finnegan and Coklyat educate and inspire their audiences to see web accessibility as a creative opportunity, not an onerous obligation.

—Amelia Rina



Amelia Rina

Can you explain what alt text is and how it's used by blind and low vision people?

Shannon Finnegan

Alt text is a written description of an image posted online. Alt text can also be added to images in digital documents (PDFs, Word documents, Google Docs, presentations, etc.).

When done well, alt text is a way for people who are blind, have low vision, or certain cognitive disabilities to access an image. It's also important for people with low-bandwidth internet connections.

To understand alt text, it is also helpful to understand screen readers, which is software that people can use to access digital displays. The screen reader outputs the text on the screen to a synthetic voice or digital braille display. For example, on a website, a screen reader might readout options in the navigation bar, followed by the title, the first paragraph, the second paragraph, etc. When a screen reader encounters an image, it's unable to "read" it. So instead, it looks for the alt text—an associated description of the image, embedded in the code. This is how alt text functions as a non-visual alternative to an image.

AR

When websites aren't accessible, how does that affect the online experience of people with disabilities?

Bojana Coklyat

It makes them feel like they don't belong. People may think that the internet is a great equalizer, but for me, as someone who lives with low vision, I often feel left out of social media due to images that are not described. We miss out on events and the camaraderie that exists when sharing images online. Overall, it can be overall less enjoyable and lead to a lack of the sense of connection that virtual spaces are meant to encourage. Feeling connected online is especially important to many people during the pandemic.

When I first learned we were approached to do an interview with BOMB, I went to their website to see how accessible it was. I found that it was difficult to navigate it with my screen reader and that most images didn't have alt text beyond captions. This kind of discrimination unfortunately exists on many art websites, despite disabled people continuing to push for more accessible websites in the art world. We hope participating in this interview will impact how art publications and organizations make their websites more accessible.

AR

What first drew you to the poetic and artistic potential of alt text writing?

SF

For me, this project grew out of a desire to support cross-disability solidarity. I'm a sighted, disabled artist, and my arts training was extremely visually focused. As my practice has evolved, an important thread has been making for fellow disabled people, centering them as my primary audience. In recent years, a big part of that has been rethinking my relationship to the visual, being much more intentional about when and why I'm working visually. And when my work does have a visual component, I want to build in accessibility and create alternate ways of experiencing the work.

I was looking for resources about image description and alt text—mostly thinking about my own website and social media. Most of what I found felt very compliance-oriented and really disconnected from the creative access I experience in disability arts spaces. I applied for a 2019 residency at Eyebeam proposing *Alt-Text as Poetry: a container for resource sharing, discussion, and collaboration about creative approaches to image description*.

BC

I was working on access for disabled people in art spaces at NYU and I wanted to find ways to do it creatively. I met Shannon at an event and they had been in the beginning stages of Alt-Text as Poetry. We both wanted to approach access more creatively. I really connected with the Alt-Text as Poetry project because there was room to be more expressive when making images of art online accessible. I live with low vision and I had found that alt text was often very dry and limited. Drawing on the well of knowledge that exists for poetry allowed us to center creativity over objectivity.



Shannon Finnegan, *Do you want us here or not*, 2020, baltic birch, poplar wood, plastic laminate, 73.5 x 27 x 35.5 inches. Photo by Justin Wonnacott. Courtesy of the artist.

AR

How is alt text currently used in an arts context?

BC

Alt text is either used to describe an image of art online or an artist will provide it to a curator so that it can be included online for an exhibit, marketing, or in social media posts.

SF

Alt-text practices vary really widely in the art world right now. Some artists, collectives, organizations, and institutions have a deep commitment to digital accessibility, others are just beginning, and for some it is still not on their radar at all.

AR

You start the *Alt-Text as Poetry* workbook with a series of questions, one of which stands out to me as particularly urgent: “How do we make spaces and experiences that disabled people not only *can* access but *want* to access?” How do those two options differ for you?

BC

One is just the bare minimum and one is pleasurable. Access is about more than just access services or accommodations—things that are only first steps toward providing a more welcoming space. There is a social component to access that often gets disregarded.

SF

Yes! We are so used to compliance-oriented access: checking a box and moving on. But access can be nourishing and generative. I often think about this passage from Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*: “access is far more to me than a checklist of accessibility needs—though checklists are needed and necessary. I mean that without deep love and care for each other, for our crip bodyminds, an event can have all the fragrance-free soap and interpreters and thirty-six-inch-wide doorways in the world. And it can still be empty. I’ve been asked to do disability and access trainings by well-meaning organizations that want the checklists, the ten things they can do to make things accessible. I know that if they do those things, without changing their internal worlds that see disabled people as sad and stupid, or refuse to see those of us already in their lives, they can have all the ASL and ramps in the world, and we won’t come where we’re not loved, needed, and understood as leaders, not just people they must begrudgingly provide services for.”

AR

The printed workbook comes in a set of two copies, and is designed to be completed by a pair of people. What motivated you to create the book in this format?

BC

The workbook experience benefits from having other people to compare and contrast your responses to the exercises. We all describe things differently, even if we are looking at the same thing. In this way, the couple doing the workbook together can learn from each other and share.

SF

Exactly. I think doing the workbook with other people draws out the subjective nature of the process. And it models, at least at a small scale, the value of thinking about access practices in community—whether that is a friend group, collective, workplace, or other network.

AR

How might subjectivity affect the way alt text is written?

BC

Nothing is really totally objective. True objectivity is really difficult to capture when describing an image. Who gets to say what is objective or subjective? Personally, I appreciate several more subjective kinds of description, they are usually more enjoyable, less “technical.” It was freeing to understand that all description is subjective, that we all make some kind of individual choice to say one word over the other.

SF

I think the pretense of objectivity is harmful because it masks power disparities. Our positioning impacts our worldview, which extends to how we perceive and describe images. When people say that they are describing “objectively,” they often mean they are describing in ways that are in tune with dominant culture. To me, it is more helpful to acknowledge our partiality and ask ourselves, “How can I report back from my experience in ways that are helpful, understandable, and interesting to my intended audience?”

We’ve definitely heard from screen reader users who are suspicious of subjective modes of description. (And I can’t say enough that screen reader users are not a monolith and want different things from description.) Some subjective descriptions are extremely vague. For example, “a beautiful landscape.” That doesn’t provide much information because the describer and the person reading the description may have really different ideas of what a “beautiful” landscape means. Image description is part of a larger process of understanding our positionality—what we know, what has been absent from our knowledge building, how our tastes and judgements have been shaped. There will be mismatch and disagreement, and that is part of what makes writing alt text a generative process.

AR

One of the writing exercises focuses on identity and representation. So many interactions in our daily lives involve making assumptions about other people’s identities. How does alt text engage with and/or challenge that process?

BC

In the past six months, I have received a lot of emails regarding this, and in workshops not directly related to alt text—people ask about describing identity frequently. After how to actually write alt text, it’s the next most asked question. I think this is also due to the huge increase in people spending time in virtual spaces due to the pandemic.

Writing alt text for images of people requires taking stock of how you to write what you think. I see many people not mention a person’s skin color or gender if they are not sure. I rarely come across people describing a person’s weight or age. Maybe alt text does get certain people thinking more about how other people would want to be described. I think we are still early in getting to a place where alt-text descriptions are equitable, but the pandemic has gotten more people paying attention to access like alt text and has opened up more conversations about how people want to be described.

SF

Yes, this is a very common question and so one we felt we should address directly in the workbook. My thinking about this is changing and shifting all the time. Recently, I’ve been thinking about mapping the power dynamics for a given image and context. Who is the describer? Who is the audience? Who created the image? Who is depicted? There are often multiple cross-oppression relationships at play and the approach to description should be responsive to that.

For all images, what we see and how we name it is political, and I think alt-text practices will continue to change as our political analysis changes. I’m excited for the possibilities to come.