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Bojana Coklyat in Conversation with Shannon Finnegan

ARTIST, ARTIST

“What can alt text learn from poetry?”
“What can poetry learn from alt text?”



by Amy Berkowitz

Illustration by Samar Faddad

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In 2019, on a whim, I signed up for a workshop called *Alt Text as Poetry* hosted at an art space in Brooklyn, New York. I wasn't sure what to expect, but as a disabled person and a poet, I was definitely intrigued. Led by Shannon Finnegan, who cocreated *Alt Text as Poetry* along with their collaborator, Bojana Coklyat, the ninety-minute workshop wound up transforming the way I think about poetry, accessibility, and perception.

Alt text refers to image descriptions embedded into HTML that can be read with screen readers used by people who are blind or have low vision or certain cognitive disabilities. In the context of *Alt Text as Poetry*, the term is used more broadly to refer to all image descriptions, whether they're embedded in code or shared in the body of a post or a caption field. Writing alt text tends to be viewed as a chore—something that must be done for compliance. *Alt Text as Poetry* rejects this idea and instead celebrates the expressive potential of alt text, encouraging people to explore writing image descriptions as a creative practice.

The workshop asked us to consider images in a new way—not as sturdy signifiers of meaning, but as flexible and free, subject to infinite interpretations—and to understand poetry not just as beautiful, expressive language but also as something immediately, urgently useful. In one exercise, we were instructed to describe the most recent picture on our phone from the perspective of a stranger seeing it for the first time. “A ruddy-faced man,” I began. The man was my husband, a man whose face I'd never considered ruddy, but there it was in the picture, with a bit of a pinkish tint to it. The experience of describing images felt intimate and tender. The challenge of sharing the heart and soul of a picture with someone makes you want to write the best poem you can. This is what poetry is, I remembered. This is what it's for.

Since taking the workshop, I've been writing descriptions for the pictures I post online. The practice makes me engage more deeply with what I post, pushes me to ask myself why I want to share the picture, what's special about it, what about it moves me. I find I'm always adjusting the language I use, depending on what the image demands. To describe my friend's dog's mood, for example, I needed short, exclamatory sentences: “Bean, a spirited black-and-gray chiweenie, sits on Jed's lap and Jed holds him in a comforting way. Bean's eyes are wide and his tongue is out. He's hot! He's excited!”

Bojana and Shannon developed *Alt Text as Poetry* together in 2019. In 2020, they released the *Alt Text as Poetry Workbook*, a series of writing exercises accompanied by an introduction about the practice of writing creative image descriptions. Bojana is a disabled artist, an access consultant, and a 2019–2020 Fulbright Fellow. In 2019, she curated *Crip Imponderabilia*, the first gallery exhibit at New York University to center disabled artists and disability culture. Currently, she works as a project leader at the Museum, Arts and Culture Access Consortium in New York City and serves as associate producer on a film funded by the American Foundation for the Blind.

Shannon is an artist who's collaborated with organizations including Banff Centre, ARGOS Centre for Audiovisual Arts, the High Line, the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, LUX, and Nook Gallery. Recent work includes *Anti-Stairs Club Lounge*, an ongoing project that brings stair-averse individuals together in protest against various inaccessible structures, most recently Hudson Yards' *Vessel*, and *Do You Want Us Here or Not*, a series of benches and cushions installed in gallery spaces.

I spoke with the artists over Zoom one day in late July 2021. It was morning for me in San Francisco, and afternoon for Bojana (in Jersey City, New Jersey) and Shannon (in Manhattan).

—Amy Berkowitz



I. MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

THE BELIEVER: Do you remember when you first noticed that alt text had poetic potential?

SHANNON FINNEGAN: I don't know exactly when the idea of poetry first came to me. It's always seemed like such an obvious fit—anytime I read an image description, I'm so interested in how it's written. The first seed of the project started as an application to Eyebeam's residency. The theme of the residency was access, and Eyebeam is a place that supports artists who are thinking about technology. I wasn't thinking a lot about technology in my work, but I had been considering the qualities and textures of access in physical space around my own access needs, because I'm sighted but I have a physical disability. So I was thinking: What would that mean in digital space? How could some of that creative, generative energy also fit with things like image descriptions or other types of digital accessibility? And so I wrote a proposal, and they said yes, and then it was like, OK, time to get to work. [*Laughs*]

BOJANA COKLYAT: This is happening! [*Laughs*]

BLVR: How did you two start working together?

BC: I was getting my masters at NYU and I was getting to know artist and academic Kevin Gotkin, and he had this get-together to discuss disability nightlife. That's where we initially met, with a group of other disabled people thinking about how to make nightlife more accessible. At that time, I was also working on my thesis show and thinking about how to make the gallery space more accessible and how to bring in art that is accessible and multimodal.

SF: When we met, I could immediately tell that we shared a lot of thinking and values around access and disability arts. So it felt like such a good fit. And here we are, two and a half years later.

BC: We'll have our three-year anniversary together at Le Pain Quotidien.

SF: We had all of our initial meetings at Le Pain Quotidien.

BLVR: Alt Text as Poetry is so engaged with play. Tell me about the choice to make a project that feels playful.

SF: The way access in general, and certainly alt text, has been approached traditionally is often really dry and kind of—I always use the word *perfunctory*. We're trying to create a contrast to that, to get to a place where we can be thinking about delight and pleasure and how access can be an enjoyable experience, not something that's endured.

BC: I think that goes back to access being this simulation of whatever needs to be accessed, or this thing that is adhering to what nondisabled people maybe think is correct. Pleasure and delight have been so left out of that, and I think that is a big part of what drives me in the project as well.

BLVR: I was introduced to Alt Text as Poetry when I took a workshop with Shannon in 2019, and since then, the practice of writing poetic image descriptions has brought so much joy into my life. Are there other people who've come out of the workshop super-jazzed about alt text?

BC: Shannon, I think you'll appreciate this: I was talking to the writer Georgina Kleege the other day and she was like, "I use Alt Text as Poetry every day. I talk about it all the time." And she's somebody who we cite in our workbook, so it was really great to hear that.

SF: Yeah, every once in a while we hear from someone who used it or got excited about it. How the material gets taken into people's lives is so exciting to me. And that's amazing to hear about Georgina.

BLVR: You mention in the *Alt Text as Poetry Workbook* that disabled people have been doing creative thinking around alt text for a long time. Tell me about Georgina's influence and any other inspirations.

SF: Georgina's book *More Than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art* rocked my world when I read it. She gave me permission to step out of this framework of objectivity in description, which I think is so necessary.

I feel this sense of interdependence with the work of other disabled creators. Alt Text as Poetry would never have existed without Georgina's work and without so many other people's work. Some of the people that come to mind off the top of my head are Kayla Hamilton, a dancer who thinks about description as kind of a choreography, and Radical Visibility Collective, who've done some extremely fun audio descriptions for videos.

BC: In *More Than Meets the Eye*, the additional revelation for me was thinking about certain stigmas attached to blind people, like a lack of curiosity, and how we attach intelligence and curiosity to eyesight, and how so often in a museum or an art space, somebody will tell me, "Well, there's nothing for you to touch here." And it's like, sure, I like to be able to touch things, but I also have a brain and you can describe things to me.

Georgina heavily influenced me in terms of thinking about the hierarchy of senses, and how vision is the most important sense, according to most of society. Blind people have so many other senses that allow them to be curious and to investigate the world and experience it, and not just by touch: for instance, Carmen Papalia navigating an area or a pathway with a marching band he's worked with, as opposed to using his white cane, which he sees as an institutional symbol [1]. So playing around with access in that way. I fell in love with that—it definitely heavily influenced how I started to think about access as creative or pleasurable or playful.

II. "HANSEL AND GRETEL REALNESS"

BLVR: Something I noticed about writing image descriptions for my Instagram posts is that the practice changes the way I pay attention. Writing the image description makes me focus on why I'm sharing the image and on what in the image is important to me. Also, the practice makes me think about access, which is already something that's on my mind as a disabled person with disabled friends, but this brings it into my daily routine in a new way. How do you think writing alt text as poetry changes the way people pay attention?

SF: Something I'm reminded of a lot in this project is that sighted people are just throwing images around. We're putting images everywhere, you know? Like a carousel of ten images—no problem! There's a kind of looseness around images that I think alt text has helped me examine. It makes me consider the question: Is an image even needed, and if an image is needed, why?

BC: I think that after people do the Alt Text as Poetry workshop, maybe they're not just paying more attention to access but also to what they want to convey.

SF: Something that has always been a hope of mine with the project is that for people who aren't as familiar with access, it introduces them to a way of thinking about access as creative and generative and collaborative and process-oriented, and that might also influence the way they think about access in other parts of their lives.

BC: Alt text is so often approached through the lens of compliance, like, *Okay, let's just get this done*. But when you're paying attention to the language you're using and how you're putting it together, that's already changing things. That's already shifting things.

BLVR: In your workbook, you identify three poetry concepts that are helpful for writing creative alt text, which are attention to language, word economy, and experimental spirit. Tell me about your relationship to poetry.

SF: I do not have a deep relationship to poetry. I have so much respect for poets, and I've been especially appreciative of disabled poets recently. It's been an interesting process for me, through this project, to feel more engaged in the world of poetry and to try to understand a little bit more of what is happening there. But I definitely also feel like an outsider.

BC: I know what you mean, Shannon. Poetry was not something I had really thought about deeply since high school. My father was actually a poet, and he shared a poem with me that he wrote in 1965. And the reason I bring it up is that it just really struck me and made me emotional. My father isn't somebody who will be like, *This is how I felt*. This poem was about him coming to the US—he was a refugee from the former Yugoslavia when he was twenty-five—and he doesn't talk about that, but he wrote this poem and he shared it with me.

I find myself engaging more in poetry with alt text, and sometimes I feel like, Oh, that came off as poetic. But I'm also like, I'm not a poet. What am I doing? I almost don't want to dip too far into making it poetic, because I don't feel like that's my realm.

SF: That's been such a tricky balancing act in the project, to get people to understand the ways that alt text can be poetic, but I think also sometimes people have a lot of specific associations with poetry, like it's hard to read, it has super-flowery language, it can be inaccessible. So I think it's interesting, because in the workshop we always say, "What can alt text learn from poetry?" and the artist JS Shokrian was like, "Well, it's also the other way: What can poetry learn from alt text?" And I think there's a lot there about communicating in a really clear and specific way or thinking about shared language or shared understanding that could be influential for poets.

BLVR: Could you give me an example of creative alt text that taught you something or surprised you?

BC: I have one example from the artist Madison Zalopany memorized: "A screenshot of me being very impressed by my nephew Harry's new hat. The hat is a plastic green roof taken from a doll's house."

I love it because it's like, *Oh, it's his new hat*, but then it's like, *I guess it's a toy he put on his head*. I love how Madison used humor, how she positioned the two sentences and, *bam*, she was able to achieve that comedic timing. I don't really think I had come across alt text that was funny and that also actually described something and got the tone of it as well.

SF: One of the things I have felt really confused about recently is describing gender. I've had a shift in my understanding of my own gender, and it can feel really hard for me to describe my gender presentation in ways that don't reinforce a binary understanding of gender. But recently I saw the poet and writer Cyrée Jarelle Johnson describe himself as "effeminate" in the alt text of a photo he posted on Twitter, and I was like, Oh, that is such a specific word that says something about gender in a really precise way that I felt excited about and took note of.

I really love experiencing how people describe themselves, and, depending on the context, it can feel like a very intimate thing. Personally, I have my less-intimate self-description and then a self-description I use when I'm in a more comfortable or close-knit space.

BLVR: Do you have any other thoughts on self-description in regard to gender or race?

BC: We definitely have gotten a lot more requests for the workshop this year, and I don't know if that's partially because the workbook came out or, I mean, I'm sure it also has to do with the pandemic. But a lot of people want us to focus on identity and how to talk about identity, and it's definitely one of the exercises in the workbook that there's the most conversation about and engagement with. People always have questions when we talk about erasure versus mis-describing somebody and how to navigate that.

SF: One of the things that has helped me think about this issue is trying to map the power dynamics in a given describing situation. If you have an image of a person, you have the subject of the image, you have the person who produced the image, you have the describer, and you have the person engaging with the description, and you can have multiple cross-oppression dynamics happening within all those relationships, and those are going to shape the description—like, they can and should shape the description.

Description is not something that's happening in a vacuum. All the harmful and oppressive systems we're a part of influence image description. So this idea that we're going to have some perfect and "right" way to describe gender or race when we haven't dismantled cisheteropatriarchy and white supremacy—that's just not real. It's all intertwined. And I also feel excited about the ways language changes, and that we may have new tools in the future to talk about things based on shifting understandings.

BC: That's so good, Shannon, and I look forward to working on these new ways to describe, new terms and definitions.

BLVR: In the workbook, you point out that your thinking about alt text is changing all the time. Can you talk more about some of the ways it's been evolving for you?

BC: I was talking to Chancey Fleet, who works at the Andrew Heiskell Braille and Talking Book Library in New York, and Chancey said something to me and I was just like, Whoa, I have to really think about that. She said, "Is it that we really live in such a visual culture? Is the most important thing visual, or is it space and symbolism?"

I was thinking about that all day yesterday. And going back to this exhibit I went to yesterday, there was a metal piece that kind of looked like scaffolding or architecture. And then we had the chance to walk through it, and it was like, Yeah, this is the experience. It's walking through it and understanding the space of it. It's not necessarily, OK, this part's five feet tall, it's metal, and it intersects with this piece that's metal. It was so much more about walking through it, navigating it, and even navigating it with someone.

I think that might be something I'll start to think about more with alt text: symbolism and space and how those fit in when you're describing something.

SF: I love that idea of thinking about symbolism. I often find that in descriptions, when someone uses a metaphor or a comparison, it really helps me understand what the subject of the description is really like, and that feels really related to this idea of symbolism. It's like: What are your associations with this thing, rather than just with how it looks?

BLVR: When you mentioned metaphor, it reminded me of a wonderful image description you shared on the Alt Text Study Club blog, where you've been posting examples of alt text you particularly appreciate. It's a post by an account called @thesonofbaldwin that says, "A gnarled tree branch in the frame is giving Hansel and Gretel realness," which made me realize that you can really use figurative language as much as you want. You don't have to say, like, "a tree branch with three knots and four smaller branches coming off of it vertically."

SF: Totally. I'm always interested in how the description can give, like, the vibe or the tone of the image. It can be really hard to do. Just saying what is in an image often doesn't actually give a sense of the feeling, and so I'm always excited when people's image descriptions do that. The example from Madison that you brought up, Bojana, does that too. It's like, *We're joking around*, and that's the tone.

BC: Also, I love that "Hansel and Gretel realness." I mean, that also speaks to—like, that phrase wouldn't have been as mainstream in the 1980s. That is a very current vernacular way of describing something that evokes a certain tone. So it speaks to the person, too, which is really interesting to me.

III. LIBERATORY ACCESS

BLVR: Shannon, there was a conversation in *Art in America* between you and Aimi Hamraie, who called Alt Text as Poetry "a great example of a cross-disability project," which I thought was a really interesting thing to point out. Tell me about how you each bring your unique ideas and experiences with disability and access to this cross-disability project.

SF: Cross-disability solidarity is really important to me. I often look to Sins Invalid's "10 Principles of Disability Justice," and cross-disability solidarity is one of them. I don't want to live in a world where only my access needs are met; I want to live in a world where all people, all disabled people, are thriving. And as an artist, as someone who's making things and experiences, it's really important to be thinking about how people are going to engage with them.

Ocularcentrism is so present; I often fall into patterns related to that, like I think first about the visual design of the website before thinking about the audio design. There've definitely been moments where Bojana will be like, "Hey, let's do it this way," and I aspire to shift and be responsive to that. I'm always learning; I'm thinking about access as a process in which there are always shifting ways of thinking and approaching something.

BC: When we started out, so much of the work we were doing was in a space, like a workshop, and we were thinking about, Oh, can somebody in a wheelchair get in here? Does this space feel comfortable? Is it ventilated? Is it hot? Is it cold? And then we really had to shift to, like, How do we think about different disabilities in these virtual spaces? I think because we were already approaching this project with a cross-disability approach, that helped us adapt. That's been an overall push: How do we make people feel welcome in the space we're creating?

BLVR: Thank you for sharing John Lee Clark's essay "Against Access," Shannon. It gave me a lot to think about. It really is *against* access; it's not just saying that certain access measures fall short; it's also arguing against access as a concept. Obviously, the essay also resonated with you—and yet you and Bojana have an art project that's focused on access. How has an awareness of the limits of access and the problems with access influenced your project?

SF: I don't feel as ready to push aside access as John Lee Clark does in that essay. I think he is responding to a particular, and quite prevalent, type of access. But I still have hope for other types of access, especially what writer Mia Mingus calls "liberatory access," which is a transformative process that restructures lots of things, including the power dynamics within a space or group.

A big part of Alt Text as Poetry for me has been a reconsideration of my own relationship to visual communication and my training as a "visual artist." When I was in school, there was no discussion of art as an ocularcentric practice or of thinking in more multimodal or haptic ways; that was just not at all a part of my arts training. I think being more intentional about when and why I communicate visually is the first step, and then in situations where it does feel important to communicate visually, thinking about description and access in tandem with that—as opposed to the way that people approach it a lot of times, which is like, *I'm not going to change the way I work at all, and then I'll just retrofit in access afterward*. It should be more a part of the process.

BLVR: Something else we were talking about earlier is that so many arts and culture websites are inaccessible. You pointed out that *The Believer's* website is pretty inaccessible. [2]

BC: In the past, we've been asked to talk about how it feels when we go to a website that isn't accessible, and I kind of feel like, Well, you know, *your* website is not accessible—the website you're writing for is not accessible—so it just feels like there's this disconnect.

SF: This comes up against something that happens all the time with accessibility and disability culture and disability arts, which is that organizations or institutions or media outlets are interested in the content but don't always understand how that relates to structural change and transformation. For me, having my work kind of slotted in without thinking about the context it's in doesn't make sense. Hosting the work can and should transform the way things are being done. And that's not always possible immediately, but, generally, I think there's value in having clear communication about when things are inaccessible and not ignoring it or pretending it doesn't exist but being like, *Yeah, you know, the place where we're hosting this conversation is not accessible, and, yeah, that sucks and that should change*. And that might not change by the time this is published, but it should change someday, hopefully sooner rather than later.

BLVR: I'm glad we're talking about it. I'd love to talk a little more about the ways you provide access in this project. The Alt Text as Poetry website is such a wonderful example of you living your commitment to creating fun, accessible, welcoming experiences, and I noticed that moment in the audio welcome where there's a splash sound, and I think it's your voice, Bojana, that says, "Should we jump in?" I want to ask about the choice to include that and the choice not to tell people who are just reading the text on the website about what happens in the audio.

BC: I started to think about the little whimsical touches, like the little flowers that dot the website, and I was thinking about how we could have a sound component that also feels like that. Like, how do we create a layer of texture that people who can't see can enjoy, and have that audio delight, like there's this visual delight? We talked with sound designer Nora Rodriguez about wanting some sounds that were whimsical and playful.

SF: We went back and forth about whether we should then have a transcript of the audio welcome. I felt like we were starting to get into what I've heard choreographer Alice Sheppard refer to as an access loop, where you're producing something for access and then you're trying to make that accessible. So we ended up feeling like it was OK to have those experiences have some type of equivalency but not exactly match.

For the launch of our project, we were so lucky to work with JJJJerome Ellis, who composed a composition for that event that also lives on the website, and for that Bojana wrote a beautiful sound description that does provide some context for what the music is.

BC: I was like, if we're creating something for the launch that's visual, why not also create something that's audio? Something to help make it feel like a celebration, because it was the Alt Text as Poetry Potluck. It was so enjoyable, and I think it was because we were thinking creatively about how to make the event potentially more pleasurable and cool for people who have low vision or no vision.

BLVR: In the audio welcome, was the laughter improvised?

BC: We're always laughing somehow. We've listened to different interviews we've done with other people and read the transcriptions; it's like "giggle, laugh, laugh, mirthful big laugh, little laugh, big laugh." And I think it speaks to our collaboration and our relationship—like, I think we really enjoy this project, and even when we're talking about something that's frustrating us, we're able to kind of make a joke.

BLVR: This project is a collaboration between the two of you, but there's also this huge, ongoing collaboration that includes the workshops and anyone who's ever used the workbook.

BC: In the workshops, I learn so much when people are talking about their descriptions. I'm struck over and over again by people's descriptions or by what might have surprised them and that I realize surprises me, or by their suggestions, or by things they bring up around identity that help me think about how I write about identity. Those moments are some of the most important parts of my collaboration with people in general.

SF: I totally relate to that, Bojana. The project has been so helpful for me; I have so many questions about describing, and being able to talk with so many different people about it and read different people's descriptions—that has just been so, so exciting.

BC: It's like, Oh, you wrote what I've been trying to say for years. Excellent—that's what I was feeling or thinking or trying to say.

1 In 2013, Carmen Papalia debuted *Mobility Device*, a performance art piece, at Cal State Fullerton's Grand Central Art Center (GCAC). For the piece, Papalia walked around downtown Santa Ana with the Century High School Marching Band, which used musical cues to alert Papalia to obstacles. According to language that accompanies a video documentation of the performance, *Mobility Device* "represents a non-institutional (and non-institutionalizing) temporary solution for the problem that is the white cane." "I was free to roam and explore, and that's exactly what I did," Papalia told GCAC. "The tempo—when it was fast, I knew that I was safe, and there were obstacles being illuminated by different sounds. I kind of really just got a sense of my surroundings in more of an efficient way than when I use a white cane." You can find the *Mobility Device* video on GCAC's YouTube page. There are a few scenes of the marching band playing a characteristically smooth rendition of George Michael's "Careless Whisper," which seems like the perfect song to accompany an epic walk.

2 We took this feedback to heart and have worked in the past months to make our website more accessible. We now include what (we hope) would be characterized as poetic alt text with every image we publish. We are also working to add alt text to our entire archive. We updated our code to make sure that all links are actual links (so screen readers are not impaired). We enabled keyboard navigability on our main navigation menu. And, in the coming months, we hope to create audio versions for select articles. These improvements aren't the end-all, be-all; they're steps in an ongoing attempt to make the magazine more accessible to more readers. Thanks to Bojana and Shannon, we're thinking more critically about our place in various access loops, and the kinds of translations and equivalencies we can create.

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