

Fighting the Art World's Ableism

Whether it's through the Vessel or the accessibility of galleries, by not sufficiently supporting the neurodiverse and disabled communities, the art world is inadvertently reinforcing the ableism that pervades American society.



by Emily Sara
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Shannon Finnegan's Anti-Stairs Club Lounge in front of Vessel (all photos by Maria Baranova, images courtesy of Shannon Finnegan)

This is an open letter to say that we, the art world, are not sufficiently supporting the neurodiverse and disabled communities. As such, we are inadvertently reinforcing the ableism that pervades American society. Ableism, if you are unfamiliar with the term, is a set of beliefs that devalues people with physical, intellectual, or psychiatric disabilities. Ableism does not always involve malicious intent; one of the most common manifestations is when individuals who are neurodiverse or disabled are simply not acknowledged. In 2019, inclusive spaces that are comprised of voices from the neurodiverse and disabled community are still extremely rare. Despite the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) 29 years ago, neurodiverse and disabled communities continue to face collective discrimination from failures to accommodate in access, transportation, employment, education, and many other arenas. Unfortunately, the art world is no exception.

Building monuments to stairs in the year 2019 falls within the “ableist” category. *Vessel* is a honeycomb-like building comprised of 154 stairways, created by designer Thomas Heatherwick and opened to the public in New York City’s Hudson Yards in March 2019. Heatherwick said he “designed the Escher-like lattice of staircases to encourage public interaction and bring people together, rather than creating an object purely to be looked at.” The irony is that one fifth of the population is disabled and will be doing exactly that — looking from a distance, unable to interact with the artwork. (The work has also caused controversies over its budget and its representation of and role in the area’s ongoing gentrification.)



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In April of this year, Shannon Finnegan and her Anti-Stairs Club Lounge organized a demonstration of disabled and non-disabled individuals to protest *Vessel* at Hudson Yards. “While *Vessel* does have what is touted as an ‘ADA-compliant’ elevator, the elevator is not an equitable means to experience the structure,” Finnegan told me in an email. The *Vessel*’s website notes that the elevator is available to individuals who have a disability — which means that parents with strollers, individuals with invisible disabilities (those disabilities that are not obvious when looking at people), and even tourists with suitcases will have a hard time accessing the structure. “From its inception, *Vessel* has centered the experience of climbing stairs and imagines a public without people unable, unwilling, or uninterested in climbing stairs,” Finnegan added. The protest included the circulation of waivers in which individuals asserted that they would never in their lives ascend a single step of *Vessel*.

In addition to stair monuments, [more than 75 New York galleries have come under fire](#) for alleged ADA violations related to website accessibility. Images without tagged descriptions for screen-reading software make accessing the internet for the visually impaired next to impossible. Though some dismiss these efforts as the work of opportunistic law firms, others see legal action as a means of achieving long-overdue justice. These are but a few examples of inaccessibility in the art world.



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Inclusion in the Arts has made some recent progress as well. The 2019 Festival of Disabled Arts, entitled “I Wanna Be With You Everywhere” and presented in collaboration with [Arika](#), the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Performance Space in New York, showcased the work of disabled artists and writers over the course of four days (April 11-14, 2019). It was a phenomenal example of inclusion, with performances and readings by such disabled artists as Johanna Hedva, NEVE, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Alice Sheppard, Jerron Herman, John Lee Clark, and many others. Johanna Hedva, author of the manifesto *Sick Woman Theory*, opened the evening with the performance *Black Moon Lilith in Pisces in the 4th House*. On the second day, the Whitney Museum hosted an intimate gathering that brought together disabled and non-disabled artists, curators, writers, and academics for a day of conversation and community building. The museum also invited guests to an optional verbal description and touch tour of the exhibition *Where We Are: Selections from the Whitney's Collection, 1900-1960*. Performances continued for the following two days, in which ASL, Real-Time Captioning (CART), Audio Description, and Assisted Listening were available, along with quiet spaces and a sliding scale of \$0-\$25 for tickets.



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Other Arts industries, like theater, television, and fashion, are also only now starting to promote and recognize a more inclusive disabled and neurodiverse community. This year, our community celebrated Ali Stroker as the first wheelchair user to win a Tony (for *Oklahoma!*). In television, Ryan O'Connell wrote and directed the semi-autobiographical Netflix series *Special* that depicts his life as a disabled gay man. Chella Man, a deaf Chinese trans actor, is slated to play the disabled character Jericho in DC Universe's *Titans*, expected in late 2019. It was the first time a disabled actor has been cast in a major role to play a disabled character in a major superhero screen property (and was followed by the casting of [Lauren Ridloff](#), a deaf actress, to play the deaf superhero Makkari in the Marvel movie *The Eternals*).

Aaron Philip made history last year as the first Black, trans, disabled model to sign with Elite Model Management, while Jillian Mercado and Mamma Cāx have attained visibility as disability rights advocates, social media influencers, and disabled models. In addition, Sinéad Burke, an activist and fashion mogul, became a contributing editor to *British Vogue* this past year. While these successes are important beginnings, they are exceptions that can still be covered in only two paragraphs. Despite these triumphs one must ultimately acknowledge the reality that most opportunities are for able bodies.



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Regarding the art world, navigating and addressing these issues will require taking fundamental steps toward inclusion, from implementing practical solutions to increasing awareness among art institutions and community members. Carolyn Lazard's pamphlet *Accessibility in the Arts: A Promise and a Practice*, commissioned by [Recess](#) in 2018, contains practical guidance for "small-scale arts nonprofits and the potentially expansive publics these organizations serve." *Accessibility in the Arts* breaks down specific accommodations, as well as how to list access information appropriately, and how to budget for inclusive spaces. Even modest shifts in practice could make an enormous difference.

I am therefore calling on galleries, curators, museums, institutions of higher education, artists, and other art institutions: welcoming the neurodiverse and disabled is long overdue. Having an ADA compliant space is the bare minimum for inclusion. It starts with art education. Classrooms should be safe spaces for multiple learning styles; educators must develop greater awareness of what is required for an accessible space. Colleges and universities must build platforms that facilitate open conversations and eliminate physical obstacles that traditionally prevent full participation by providing simple accommodations like accessible desks and seating, free disabled parking, and cut curbs. If you're a gallerist, please assess how many disabled artists you've exhibited in the recent past. Curators, ask yourself how many opportunities have gone solely to able bodies and whether disability and neurodiversity even receive consideration.



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To those in public organizations, make sure that you hire a disability consultant to review your space and that you regularly engage with your disabled community, not just at your organization's inception but as long as it exists. If you are a small organization, reviewing and adopting suggestions from Lazard's *Accessibility in the Arts* is an excellent place to start.

The following is a list, by no means complete, to begin with: All spaces should have combinations of on-grade entrances, ample seating with support, ASL interpreters, communication access real-time translation (CART), all-gender restrooms, assisted listening devices, 1:12 ramps, railings, grab bars, foot stools, temperature control, quiet spaces, closed captions, and a staff educated about service animal etiquette. And many, many other accommodations are needed.

If you decide against these, you are, simply put, saying that we are not welcome.

Sincerely,

A Crip in the Arts