

# SHANNON FINNEGAN AND AIMI HAMRAIE ON ACCESSIBILITY AS A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

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ILLUSTRATION BY KIMBERLY CHO.

**AIMI HAMRAIE** Can you tell me about “Anti-Stairs Club Lounge”?

**SHANNON FINNEGAN** The first version was at the Wassaic Project in Upstate New York in 2017. Their historic building has seven floors and no elevator. I consider fellow disabled people to be the audience for my work, so I was trying to figure out if or how I could continue making art in an inaccessible space. I decided to make the lounge behind a door with a keypad entry: in order to get the access code, you had to sign a piece of paper promising that you wouldn’t go up the stairs to the other six floors of the space. The lounge became a space exclusively for people who were staying on the ground floor, whether out of necessity or in solidarity.

Last April, I took the lounge to Thomas Heatherwick’s Vessel in New York, a monumental structure made up of 154 interconnected stairways. When I saw the plans, I felt “Anti-Stairs Club Lounge” had to respond. The area around the Vessel is

Nearly thirty years after the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed, **accessibility** for disabled people both online and in public space remains severely insufficient. New York artist Shannon Finnegan and design historian **Aimi Hamraie**, who currently resides in Nashville, held a video chat on October 9 to discuss their respective artistic, activist, and historical takes on disability justice. Hamraie's book *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017) asks who counts as "everyone" according to architects of the Universal Design movement, which began in the late twentieth century. Finnegan's artistic practice includes interventions like "Museum Benches" (2018), benches that bear inscriptions like **THIS EXHIBITION HAS ASKED ME TO STAND FOR TOO LONG. SIT IF YOU AGREE.** She also hosts the "Anti-Stairs Club Lounge" (2017–), spaces for rest at inaccessible sites. The project caricatures the exclusivity of luxury airport lounges by bringing together people who are often excluded and their allies. The two discuss their practices below, framing access as a collective responsibility ideally informed by care, echoing the Access Is Love movement led by disabled activists Mia Mingus, Alice Wong, and Sandy Ho.

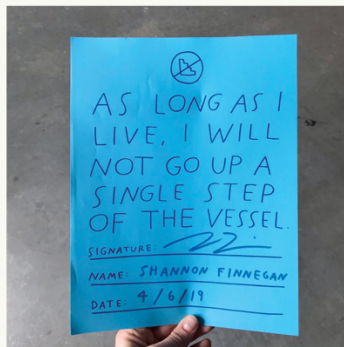


**Shannon Finnegan:** "Anti-Stairs Club Lounge," interactive performance at the Vessel, New York, 2019.  
PHOTO MARIA BARANOVA.

privately owned, which means that the owners have full jurisdiction over what is allowed to happen there. They can forbid protest, so I had to be really strategic. The idea of a lounge still guided the gesture: I created space to gather and rest, providing pillows and snacks. To mark the lounge, I created a newspaper-like version of Kevin Gotkin's essay "Stair Worship: Heatherwick's Vessel" [from the *Avery Review*, 2018]. When you opened the paper up to read it, the exterior functioned as a sign that said "Anti-Stairs Club Lounge." I also made bright orange beanies with crossed-out stairs symbols on them, designating people in the club. Just like at the Wassaic Project, to participate in the lounge, you had to refuse the inaccessible space. Participants signed paperwork that said: "As long as I live, I will not go up a single step of the Vessel."

**HAMRAIE** I'm interested in how this project invites participation as an embodied argument. The same is true of your benches. In both projects, you invite your audience into the piece, making the political statement something that people do with their bodies.

Increasingly, there are entire neighborhoods being planned by one developer—including Hudson Yards, which houses the Vessel. We see lots of amenities like sidewalks and benches as public because they're outside a building, but they're still privatized, and often especially surveilled or policed. That's why I think your tactics are so interesting as a social movement strategy: you've created something that disseminates critique and knowledge, but is also a protest sign that people can casually fold up and take home if the cops show up.



"Anti-Stairs Club Lounge" pledge for the Vessel participants.

I also love your strategy of physically bringing Gotkin's article to the space. So often, criticism and the object of critique remain completely separate. People who design spaces are often oblivious to what scholars like myself are saying about them. You also present the critique to tourists going to the Vessel to take selfies, and insert your argument by having disabled people gather at the site. Can you tell me more about the audience for your work?

**FINNEGAN** I've been disabled my whole life, but I grew up really isolated from other disabled people. I was encouraged not to identify as disabled, not to seek out the disability community, and not to find disabled role models. That was combined with really horrible media information about disability—the representations I experienced, and continue to experience, are about tragedy and pity, or about overcoming and moving beyond disability. Reading and engaging with the work of other disabled people sparked an incredible shift in my life. Understanding other peoples' experiences helped me understand my own experience, and how it's shaped socially and culturally. I want to experience and create those moments when something you've thought about crystallizes or gets validated. I think about disabled people as the primary audience for my work because so often, we're not being spoken to.

**HAMRAIE** You're also shifting the balance of art that disabled people can access, precisely because so many spaces are inaccessible for us. There's a longer history of accessibility laws being applied and enforced in public spaces than in private spaces. In private spaces—like Hudson Yards, as well as many art spaces—there's a lag in enforcement: it takes something like a lawsuit. So I'm not surprised that the Vessel exists. There is an elevator, so there's this idea that accessibility is an add-on at the end, even though the monument is about valorizing strength and climbing—the justification being, "It's OK because there's an elevator."





Shannon Finnegan: *does you want us here or not* [Drawing], 2017.



Shannon Finnegan's *Do you want us here or not*, 2018, at the Dedalus Foundation, New York.

Similar arguments are made about buildings that have features called “irresistible staircases”—that’s a real phrase! They’re supposed to be public health tactics, enticing or even tricking people into taking the stairs. Designers make staircases a building’s main event, and then hide the elevator in the back. Some of these features have some sort of art installation attached to them: there’s one here in Nashville, at the Lenz Public Health Center. When you go up the stairs, LED bubbles light up so that people can see: “Oh! Someone’s using the stairs! Congratulations!” There’s no art piece that lights up and celebrates somebody using the elevator. The building itself celebrates a certain type of body. I think, over time, the ADA will have more regulatory guidelines around these types of features, but at the moment, they’re totally compliant, even though they promote a culture of inaccessibility and shame people for taking the elevator.

**FINNEGAN** Earlier this year, I brought “Anti-Stairs Club Lounge” to Gibney, a dance space in New York. The place used to have a situation similar to what you describe, with the accessible entrance around the corner. But when Gibney remodeled, they asked me to do a project for the opening of the new elevator. I decided to mark the elevator itself as an “Anti-Stairs Club Lounge.” I installed vinyl lettering on the elevator wall that says WELCOME: ANTI-STAIRS CLUB LOUNGE, and added a removable stool so you can sit in the elevator. I’ve been thinking about naturally occurring “Anti-Stairs Club Lounge”—spaces where people who are deprioritizing stairs tend to gather—and how to mark those gatherings as a community.

**HAMRAIE** Ramps and elevator access for wheelchair users clearly continue to be abysmal in most places. But for so long, “accessibility” has been used to refer exclusively to wheelchair

access. If you try to talk to somebody about any access need that’s different from that, responses can be catastrophic. People don’t always think that different needs—strobe warnings, peanut-free environments—are equally valid. That’s why the Disability Justice movement is so important—this cross-disability campaign makes an effort to include people with nonapparent disabilities and chronic illnesses, and to think about how disability intersects with class. That’s the kind of analysis I think we need.

**FINNEGAN** Your writing has been so helpful for me in thinking about what we mean when we say things are “universal” in the sense of being open to “all” or “everyone.” Now, every time I read “design for all,” it raises a red flag: I’m not sure it’s possible to create something that works for everyone, so when someone says that, it signals to me that they haven’t considered the limits of what they’re doing.

**HAMRAIE** I was writing *Building Access* right around the time that Michael Brown was killed by the police and the Black Lives Matter movement started. There was a lot of conversation about how the slogan, “All Lives Matter” was anti-black, because it refused to say that black lives do matter and was intended, instead, to divert the conversation. I thought about how that sentiment shows up in design practices: I find that we constantly hear promises of the most aspirational forms of inclusion and accessibility, and at the same time, we’re constantly excluded. What’s up with that?

It became really clear that the reason this exclusion keeps happening is that we’re not specific enough about our commitments. A flyer for a party might say it’s body positive: all bodies welcome. But then you might inquire about a specific form of accessibility, and might receive a total refusal or a lot of back-and-forth: then it becomes clear that there is no true intention to really include everyone. That’s because we’re not thinking about our specificities and differences. One of many critiques of so-called identity politics is that, if we say people are different, it’s going to divide us and polarize us. But I believe that the kind of false universalization that’s proposed as the alternative to identity politics tends to center on the most powerful people. It’s really important to know as much as possible about all of the ways that we’re different.

**FINNEGAN** That idea of access as an ongoing process is really important for me.

**HAMRAIE** Universality makes us feel like we have to be perfect and one hundred percent accessible in all these unanticipated ways, so people often aren’t fully assessing what kinds of accessibility they are able and willing to provide. As a result, I frequently go to places that I’ve been told are going to be accessible, and then I have to leave. It’s important to practice openness and be willing to negotiate. Your alt-text-as-poetry workshops seem like a great example of a cross-disability project.



Shannon Finnegan's "Anti-Stairs Club Lounge" at the Wassaic Project, New York, 2017–18.  
PHOTO VERÓNICA GONZÁLEZ MAYORAL.

**FINNEGAN** I've been developing workshops with Bojana Coklyat, an artist who lives with low vision, to think about how to make artwork accessible in nonvisual ways. I've focused on describing visual information online using alt text [phrases associated with images in HTML, often accessed using software that reads them aloud]. The workshop introduces people to alt text, but moves away from compliance-oriented, minimum effort, check-the-box modes of thinking about access, toward creative and generative approaches.

**HAMRAIE** Alt text and image descriptions are typically approached with objective descriptions that are economical with words. This presumes that there is such a thing as an objective description. I wonder if you could say a little bit about why—especially as an artist—it's important to aestheticize descriptions.

**FINNEGAN** It's important to distinguish our workshop from access consulting: often, people seek consulting in search of concrete guidelines. But cut-and-dried instructions for alt text haven't really been worked out yet. The project is trying to get more people thinking about this issue collectively so that we can start building a toolkit. AI's capacity to generate image descriptions is going to improve, and we want to have a say in thoughtfully setting the framework as to what it prioritizes.

**HAMRAIE** While researching for my book, I learned that architectural accessibility and digital accessibility standards emerged almost at the same time. Some groundwork for architecture was laid in the '60s, but really in the '80s, leading up to the ADA, people were hard at work and in dialogue about both. Many digital accessibility standards overlapped with thinking about flexible designs that factored in user error.

Nowadays, we're thinking more about access to information as something that we are all designers of, so we all have a responsibility. Content producers—these new types of laborers—are responsible for having their audio transcribed, or providing image descriptions. We're so used to outsourcing the labor of accessibility to architects and web developers.

**FINNEGAN** That question of who is responsible for access is something I think about a lot in my workshops. People are often overwhelmed by the task of making images accessible.

**HAMRAIE** Accessibility often gets subjected to economic calculations—when is it worth it? How much more productive is it going to make someone? The whole legal framework for disability in the US is intended to yield productive workers and good consumers.

**FINNEGAN** We're not quite in a place where the labor of accessibility is valued, and many people—often already overworked—find it stressful when they learn about all this work they don't yet know how to do. I hope the value of that labor is shifting.

—Moderated by Emily Watlington

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