Accessibility in the Arts: A Promise and a Practice

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PART I

WHY ACCESSIBILITY?

Accessibility in the Arts: A Promise and a Practice is an accessibility guide geared toward small-scale arts nonprofits and the potentially expansive publics these organizations serve. It details specific ways in which disabled people are excluded from cultural spaces and offers possible solutions to those barriers. Moving away from historical and juridical definitions of accessibility, this guide considers the unique capacity of small scale arts organizations to meet the needs of disabled communities. It engages principles of disability justice to think through what can urgently be done to create more equitable and accessible arts spaces.

Developed by queer and trans activists of color in the Bay area, Disability Justice (DJ) is the second wave of the disability rights movement, transforming it from a single issue approach to an intersectional, multisystemic way of looking at the world. Within this framework, disability is defined as an economic, cultural, and/or social exclusion based on a physical, psychological, sensory, or cognitive difference. Disability Justice movements understand disability to be unevenly distributed, primarily affecting black and indigenous communities, queer and trans communities, and low income communities. Disability is structurally reinforced by ableism, a system rooted in the supremacy of non-disabled people and the disenfranchisement of disabled people through the denial of access. Accessibility is the

primary tool that organizations can engage to dismantle ableism and create a more inclusive space; it defines the degree to which all people can engage with certain resources and participate in cultural, social, political, and economic spheres.

Arts institutions without considered accessibility measures are facing significantly diminished audience members and visitors. According the U.S Census Bureau, one-fifth of the U.S, population is disabled. Investing in accessibility is a surefire way for any small-scale arts organization to expand its viewership. It can include a wide variety of actions and policies from making a physical space wheelchair accessible and ensuring ASL interpretation for public events, to all-gender restrooms and sliding-scale ticketing. Prioritizing accessibility in arts spaces begins with asking oneself some basic questions: Who comes to our events? Why do those people come to our events? Who doesn't come to our events? Why do those people not come to our events?

Conversations about access have traditionally been explored within a juridical framework. Our current understanding of accessibility is heavily reliant on the terms set by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This landmark piece of legislation, signed into effect in 1990, requires employers to support the needs of disabled workers and provide accommodations to make the workplace accessible. It also

mandates certain accessibility measures for governmental organizations, nonprofits, and businesses which service the public. ADA compliance is not a set of predetermined standards; the law exempts businesses and organizations with less than 15 employees, meaning that many small-scale arts nonprofits are not legally obligated to have accessible spaces. As a result, many organizations are motivated by the desire to protect themselves legally instead of viewing accessibility as indispensable.

And yet the very definition of "small-scale" that allows organizations to evade ADA compliance can be seen as a strength, as small-scale arts organizations are perhaps more capable of meeting the needs of their audiences than larger institutions. Big museums, for example, might have access to more financial resources, but are often plagued by bureaucracy and inaccessible leadership. A smaller staff can lead to less bureaucracy and closer contact with an institution's public. The person introducing the event at a small-scale arts nonprofit might also be the person who set out the seats earlier in the evening. These systems of organization allow for more flexibility and change within an organization. Programs and exhibitions tend to bend to the frameworks presented by large arts institutions, whereas smaller arts institutions can be redefined with each project they engage.

ADA compliance is not the only way to create truly inclusive cultural spaces. It is critical to address not just the infrastructure but the very exhibitions and programs that make an institution accessible. Do your exhibitions, screenings, performances, and talks reflect the community that you want to bring into your space? Do they address the concerns, needs, and discourses of said community? How can institutions think through their programming and exhibitions in holistic ways that fold into and expand out from various communities? Supporting the cultural labor of disabled artists and thinkers must happen in tandem with infrastructural changes. Additionally, arts organizations need disabled art workers in positions of leadership to create actual substantial shifts. There is often a striking discord between an institution's desire to represent marginalized communities and a total disinvestment from the actual survival of those communities. The ideal arts space is simple: it's one in which art and culture are not sequestered from the lived experience of artists and their communities.

The creation of accessible spaces cannot be done without dismantling the pernicious liberalism that pervades our lives and our relationships with each other, not just as artists and art workers, but as subjects of the state. To commit to disability justice is to redefine the terms of subjecthood. It's to

undo the rampant individualism that is a fiction for both disabled and nondisabled people: everyone has needs. If followed, this guide will not produce an ADA-compliant institution, but it will hopefully provide some entry points into building a more inclusive foundation for the cultural work that an arts organization does. Conversations about disability often rely on the idea of accessibility as a set of particular, preset interventions, but accessibility requires great flexibility. It demands a malleable infrastructure that shifts, in real time, with the needs of the community. We cannot account for every need that every person will ever have.To this end, this guide is in no way meant to be comprehensive, but will hopefully change the institutional landscape of the arts. Accessibility is a promise, not a guarantee. It's a speculative practice.

PART II

ACCOMODATIONS

This section provides a list of recommendations that focus primarily on the hard and soft architecture of accessibility. These are not legal requirements: these guidelines are meant to facilitate actual infrastructural change while proposing solutions for how institutions of varying resources, personnel, and building management might meet the call to eradicate access barriers.

American Sign Language Interpretation

There are multiple tools and resources available for supporting d/Deaf and Hard of Hearing (HOH) members of an arts community. While smaller scale arts spaces may not have the resources to provide American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation at every event, they should be able to offer it as an option for most events. Part III of this guide will provide more detailed information about how to list access information in advance of an event. To have an event properly interpreted, you will most likely need to hire two interpreters over the course of an event. Interpreters will often ask for a list of key terms, or some texts to help familiarize themselves with the language of the event. Some basic manners with interpreters: please do not address them directly while they are interpreting, because they are working. If you are communicating with someone who primarily communicates via lipreading and/or ASL, please respond

directly to them with your words, gaze, and body language, and not to their interpreter.

Audio Description

AD)))

Image description:
The audio description symbol: The capital letters A and D followed by 3 parentheses

Audio Description is a service that narrates visual content to increase accessibility for the blind and visually impaired. It can also be helpful for people with learning and cognitive disabilities. For performances, this can take the form of live narration through a headset. Audio describers provide real-time narration which connects to a headset for the audio describer user. For visual media, audio description can be incorporated as its own discrete soundtrack. The audio description symbol is the letters "AD" followed by three parentheses. Ideally, institutions should make professional audio description available at their events. An alternative, cost-effective option is to have an organization's staff trained in audio description, as there are many AD training programs available nationally.

Communication Access Real-Time Translation (CART)

CART is a real-time, speech-to-text captioning system that can be used for live and remote events broadcast online. A stenographer or captioner does the real-time transcription which is then displayed on a monitor or an LED board. CART is helpful for the deaf and hard of hearing (HOH), people with English as a second language, and people with learning and cognitive disabilities. Not all members of the deaf and HOH community speak ASL, so CART can be a critical point of communication access. It also produces a transcript of events for further use and archiving. CART service providers will bring all the required equipment and their services, like ASL, should be arranged well in advance of an event.

Chemical Sensitivity and Air Quality

People with multiple chemical sensitivities and chemical injuries are incredibly sensitive to petroleum-based chemicals and fragrances that permeate body products, cleaning products, building materials, and foods. Most household and industrial materials off-gas chemicals which can trigger a wide array of responses inclusive of migraines, cognitive impairments, asthma, and other allergic reactions. The air is a shared resources and

indoor air quality is an access issue for many disabled people (especially the chronically ill). A few measures can be taken to create a more accessible shared air space.

Institutions can ask their patrons to come to events fragrance-free. It can be difficult to regulate what people choose to put on their bodies, but if a space is labeled as fragrance-free it will discourage people from using perfume and cologne before attending an event. Organizations can also impact air quality by using non-toxic, unscented cleaning product without "fragrance." "Fragrance" is an unregulated substance found in ingredient lists that is a common irritant for chemically sensitive people. Cleaning common spaces regularly to remove dust and other allergens is recommended as well as periodically having arts spaces checked for mold. Smoking areas should be clearly designated at a minimum of 5 feet from the entrance of the space.

Childcare

In an ideal world, cultural organizations wouldn't have to provide childcare because it would already be covered by the state. Unfortunately that's not the case, but there are some critical things that arts spaces can provide to facilitate access for parents, caregivers, and children. Playstations or even a

box with toys and drawing materials can be incredibly helpful to people with children. Most restrooms in public buildings are mandated to have baby-changing stations. Baby-changing stations should be installed in all gendered restrooms, not just the "women's" restroom. Simply stating that "children are welcome" or that your program includes "adult material" can be very helpful to caregivers in determining whether your event is accessible to them or not.

Closed Captioning

Image description:
A closed captions symbol: Two white capital letter Cs inside of a black rectangle with rounded corners

Closed captioning facilitates access for the deaf and hearing-impaired (HOH).
It includes text-based transcription of dialogue and description of sounds, affect, and music. A variety of media content also provide closed captions and can be recognized by the closed caption symbol of two white "Cs" in a black box. DVD media often contain closed captions under the subtitles menu. YouTube provides an option for closed captions as well as a separate transcript of the captions. Arts spaces can facilitate access by using closed captions that are already provided with media

and they can also easily produce original captions for content. Resources and free software for generating captions can be found in Part IV of this guide.

Communication

People with psychological, developmental, and/or cognitive disabilities face incredible barriers to community access. It's important to hold space and awareness for varied communication styles. It's helpful to speak slowly and allow for variations in people's response time. Institutions should not make assumptions about how to read the communication styles of others. According to narrow, nondisabled communication styles, some people may appear to be less responsive than they are and vice versa. Some disabled people may need to twitch, pace, and/or not maintain eye contact. The way organizations and their staff communicate with their public is the primary mode of accessibility in non-profit arts spaces. When an event is being introduced, the language of accessibility should be brought into the space. Statements can be made that announce an organization's willingness to make accommodations if anyone needs assistance. Viewers and audience members should be directed to a specific members of staff who will troubleshoot last-minute accommodations. Another helpful tip is to limit the

use of jargon which can be a barrier to those who are dealing with cognitive and developmental impairments and/or those who do not have access to higher education. Access needs are not static; they can change in relation to infinite factors. Staff members should introduce themselves often and use names repeatedly. If there are multiple points throughout an event when a staff member is addressing the audience, they can recapitulate the evening and explain the different phases of the event. People should be invited to clarify points of inquiry or any confusion they have. A lot of access is primarily about letting guards down and facilitating an environment where needs can be met.

Consent

Organizations can facilitate more accessible environments by creating an institutional culture that privileges consent in interpersonal interactions. Before entering into someone's personal space, asking for consent should be encouraged in regards to touching other people's bodies, hair, assistive devices, etc. In the event of performance works that are interactive or require accessing the personal space of audience members, staff should highlight this aspect of the event in event literature and/ or while introducing the event itself.

Content warnings

Content warnings facilitate access for people with psychological disabilities, especially people who live with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Content warnings are notes that can be mentioned verbally at an event, or written at the beginning of a text or video online, that name potentially triggering content. PTSD triggers can cause survivors of abuse or trauma to experience panic attacks, psychotic breakdowns, and a wide host of emotional and physiological symptoms. Anything could be potentially triggering depending on the individual's experience of trauma but there are common topics which should be mentioned in a content warning: rape and sexual assault, suicide and self-harm, incest and child abuse, and gendered and racialized violence. Content warnings have, in recent history, come under scrutiny as a form of censorship, yet warnings provide increased access to content through transparency. While institutions cannot control someone's experience in an art space, they can provide their audiences with the knowledge and the tools to navigate the space and their own mental health.

Food and Dietary Restrictions

As food intolerances and allergies become more and more prevalent, there are some basic guidelines to follow when offering food to the public. Foods with known allergens and irritants (tree nuts, gluten, dairy, soy, seafood) should be clearly labeled. Certain foods, like peanuts, can result in serious hospitalizations for those with a peanut allergy. If you are hosting an event with snacks, please be mindful of people's varied tolerances for foods and for example, purchase both regular and gluten-free products. Consider buying simple snacks with limited ingredients e.g.. carrots with hummus. Also, if you are serving alcohol, please provide alternatives for those who do not drink. Food and drinking are such critical elements of sociality and arts events can be as inclusive as possible, allowing for people's varied needs.

Harm Reduction and Overdose Preparedness

There are harm reduction measures that institutions can take to support the access needs of people living with chemical dependencies. Narcan (Naloxone) is a short-term opioid-blocker that can reverse fatal overdoses. Narcan can be purchased as an injectable or as an easy to use nasal spray. It costs between

$20–$40 dollars and can be a life-saving intervention. Arts organizations should have Narcan on hand and staff should be familiar with how to administer it.

Image Captions for Web Accessibility

Most of the internet is inaccessible to blind and vision-impaired people. A screen reader is commonly used text-to-speech or text-to-Braille software that increases web accessibility. Screen readers cannot read images and so all images require image captions in order to be legible. Image captions are usually 1–3 sentence descriptions of the content of an image. It's best if they are as simply described as possible. Increasing web accessibility also supports those who are illiterate, live with learning disabilities, and/or have poor internet connections. Further guidelines on how to write image captions are in Part IV.

Lighting and Flash Recording

Harsh lighting can trigger chronic migraines and photosensitive epilepsy. Fluorescent lights are significantly more triggering than LED natural lights. If an arts space has scalable lights, they should consider using dimmer lighting for events. Audience members should be be told in advance when stroboscopic lights

are used in performances and screenings. If possible, flash photography should not be used during events. If it is absolutely necessary, patrons should be made aware during event introductions.

Live Streaming Events

Live Streaming or video documentation made available to the public are another critical tool for creating more accessible arts institutions. Many people's primary encounters with art are through the internet. Arts spaces can be inaccessible for those who cannot leave their homes due to a wide array of disabilities. The technology will undoubtedly change over time, but there are many free applications available for live streaming. Currently, social media platforms with streaming services such as Facebook Live, YouTube Live, and Instagram Live are the most reliable and produce videos that can be archived for further use and dissemination. In addition, if your audience will be captured during the livestream, please let the audience know that they will be included before the event begins and ask for their consent. Be prepared to rearrange seats to accommodate audience responses.

Mobility

While the ADA has a narrow scope of focus, its stipulations for architectural barriers are well worth noting. When these considerations are taken into account, a space can become accessible to a wide range of people with varying mobilities: wheelchair users, walker users, cane users, children, people carrying bags, and people pushing strollers. The standard ADA compliant door width is between 32 inches and 48 inches with a clearance of 36" around the door. Automated entrances are ideal, but a lever handle that can be used with one hand is prefered over a round knob which is less accessible. For a building that does not have an on-grade entrance (an entrance that is flush with the ground), ADA ramps require a slope ratio of 1:12. If a building cannot accommodate the installation of a ramp, temporary ramps can be purchased.

Personal Care Assistants (PCA) and Service Animals

Many disabled people rely on personal care assistants for care work and for facilitating myriad points of access. If a disabled person visits an arts space and is accompanied by a PCA, their PCA should receive free admission. If it's necessary to communicate with someone who is accompanied by a PCA,

please respond to that individual with your words, gaze, and body language, and not their PCA.

Service animals are trained animals that support people living with a wide variety of disability-related impairments. People with service animals should be welcomed into cultural spaces and accommodated. If a person with animal allergies is present, an organization's staff should facilitate people occupying different parts of an arts space to mediate the situation.

Restrooms

Restrooms cross over into mobility access as well: For ADA compliance, restrooms or restroom stalls should be large enough to have a clear circle, wheelchair-turning radius of 60 inches. Sinks (or at least one sink, in a multi-stall bathroom) should be mounted under 34 inches from the ground with clearance underneath. Faucets should be accessible like door handles: either lever-operated, triggered by touch or movement, or electronically-operated. Toilets should be 17 to 19 inches off of the ground with grab bars on the side and rear wall, 33 to to 36 inches off of the ground.

In addition to architectural barriers, some considerations regarding gender not addressed by the ADA can significantly

increase the accessibility of an arts space. Trans and gender-nonconforming people face significant barriers to safely using restrooms in public spaces. Restrooms are often gender-segregated and labeled as "men's room" and "women's room." This kind of signage promotes gender policing which is a safety risk for people who do not fit neatly into prevailing cisexist and binary models of gender. Institutions can re-label restrooms (especially single-stall restrooms) with gender-inclusive signs by producing new vinyl signs or handwritten and taped signs, depending on respective budgets. Labels should state clearly "all gender restroom" or "gender-inclusive restroom." Even if a restroom without signage is presumed to be all gender, it's helpful to have it clearly marked.

Spanish Language

The census reports that 17.8% of the U.S. population is Spanish-speaking. Institutions can greatly increase access by having well-translated bilingual text online on their website and in their print materials. Ideally all events would be bilingual with simultaneous Spanish language translation. Institutions may not be able to provide this at every event, but should make it clearly available as a resource for its spanish-speaking public.

Seating and Seating arrangements

People of varying sizes and abilities require varying kinds of seating for an event. Organizations and institutions can invest in diverse seating with this in mind. Some things to consider: chairs that are too low can be difficult to move in an out of. Chairs with armrests can be helpful to be people with mobility restrictions while also being a barrier to fat people. The key is to have a set diverse seating options. Chairs with backs, rather than benches and stools, are also supportive for people in different kinds of bodies. It's best to have modular seating that can be arranged differently for different events and different audiences. Chairs should be arranged to accommodate larger aisles (at least 36 inches) for wheelchairs and custom seating arrangements that leave space for wheelchairs along with stable chairs. Please be sure to keep aisles clear of bags and equipment.

Sensory Rooms

Institutions can increase accessibility for a neurodiverse public by providing sensory rooms for sensory stimulation and calming. If an arts spaces has access to a room in addition to their primary exhibition or performance space, this can be turned into

a sensory room. These separate spaces usually contain different objects that can support autistic people to regulate sensory input and stimulation. Weighted blankets, pillows, yoga mats, bosu balls, and dim lighting are a few things that can help create a sensory room.

Sliding Scales and Economic Justice

The poverty rate for disabled populations is double the national average. Disability is often the cause and the consequence of poverty. This, obviously, restricts the capacity for disabled people to spend time in arts and cultural institutions. Understandably, arts nonprofits rely in part on ticket sales to fund portions of their programming. Yet, thinking through access, there are alternative business models that allow for more equitable admissions policies. Arts organizations can institute a sliding scale admissions policy. Sliding scales acknowledge the economic diversity of one's audience and the impact that lack of economic access can have on one's access to cultural organizations. They foreground everyone's inherent value in a given space and create a culture in which everyone feels equally a part of the sustainability of an arts organization, within their economic means. For example, if the current cost of admission for your event is $10, consider creating a pay scale of $6–$15.

Text

There are many guidelines for general print text accessibility, but here are a few basic recommendations that can be easily adhered to: Organizations should abstain from using all bold or all caps for extended blocks of text. When possible, use lists or bulleted items. And always use a san-serif typeface for long sections of text. To accommodate those with low vision, 16–18 point font is preferred.

Touch Tours

If your space puts on exhibitions displaying physical objects, consider putting together touch tours of your exhibitions. Touch tours increase accessibility for people who are blind or vision-impaired by facilitating tactile engagement with art works. They can incorporate the work on display or they can use relief versions of 2-dimensional work, replicas, and creative props to help illustrate exhibitions. Tours can be guided or self-guided and can be be even more accessible with the use of Braille maps and audio guides for a comprehensive experience.

Transportation

The very ability to arrive at an arts institution is deeply dependent on the transportation infrastructure that surrounds the space. Providing transportation information is a simple and critical way to facilitate increased access to your space. In event announcements, detailed information about the location of your venue should be listed. Some questions to consider when writing transportation information: How far is your space from the subway or bus station? Is that subway station or bus station wheelchair accessible? Are you in a neighborhood where there are compromised curb cuts? Are you in a neighborhood that is well-serviced by taxis? Is there street parking near your venue?

Consider budgeting a small pool of money for the creation of a transportation fund for community members for whom transportation is an access barrier. Many public transit systems are difficult or impossible for disabled people to navigate. Public transportation can also be inaccessible for trans people, especially trans feminine people of color, who are at risk for assault. Facing a physically inaccessible and socially hostile public transit system, the ability to travel in a taxi is the difference between being able to participate

in a cultural space or not. In addition to providing transportation information, list your transportation fund as an available resource along with event details.

PART III

HOW TO LIST ACCESS INFORMATION

As organizations make their spaces more accessible, it is also important to make information about accessibility available to their audiences. Listing access information is a large part of facilitating access. This section provides pointers on how to list access information in an event description.

Transparency in Access Notes

Sometimes organizations will list access information on the "About" or "Info" section of their websites, but it is rarely featured prominently in relation to events and exhibition cycles. Access information should be provided frequently and regularly updated. Access information should be synced and consistent across all platforms: an organization's website, facebook event, email announcement, and instagram post, should all list the same information. Often, institutions do not want to list access information because it highlights how inaccessible their spaces actually are. The only thing more inaccessible than an inaccessible space is not providing information about how the space is structured. Listing access information requires that institutions address what they can accommodate and especially, what they can't accommodate.

When listing access information, organizations should refrain from making decisions about how accessible their

space is. Instead of stating: "there are 3 small steps into the exhibition space," they can state "there are 3, 2 inch steps into the exhibition space." Qualifiers like "small" or a "few" are imprecise. 3 steps, no matter how "small," are inaccessible to wheelchair users. When possible, organizations should supply exact measurements about the dimensions of entrances, pathways, etc. If staff are unsure of about a point of access, it's best to err on the side of providing too many details rather than too few details. A large part of facilitating access is about welcoming and maintaining open communication with an institution's public. Programs should not be unilaterally developed and then presented to an audience. They should be developed with an audience's needs in mind. At the end of a listed access note, staff should make themselves available to the public by phone or by email for additional access requests. During events, there should be a specific point person who is in charge of facilitating access and answering questions about the space and the access resources available.

PART IV

BUDGETING

Accessibility is something that can be achieved regardless of resources. It's about changing an organization's orientation, and privileging the needs of its visitors and audience members. Organizational budgets become a critical part of this work and call for greater accessibility. Institutions can greater meet the needs of their publics by starting their accessibility initiatives with their budgets. Accessibility, if it isn't already, should be a line item in organization budgets each year. Maybe an arts space can't afford ASL interpretation at every event, but they can afford it for 5 events out of the year. Spaces should also budget for anticipated, but unknown costs related to increasing access to their space.

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