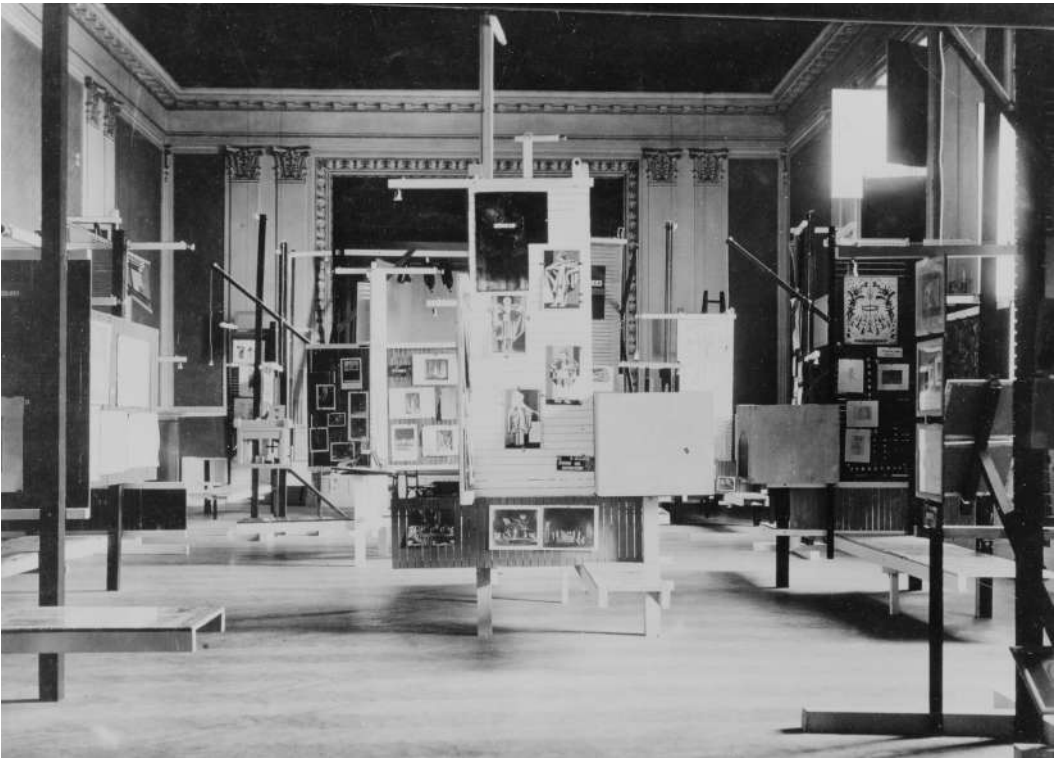


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Frederick Kiesler, Leger- und Trägersystem (L+T System) Internationale Ausstellung neuer Theatertechnik, Vienna (1924). Photo: © and courtesy of Austrian Frederick and Lillian Kiesler Private Foundation, Vienna.

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Constructing Elastic Worlds: From Avant-Garde Exhibition Design to Crip Comfort

Abstract

This article argues that avant-garde exhibition design was at the forefront of constructing elastic worlds for bodies of all shapes, heights and sizes, yet there is a dearth of scholarship recognizing what these innovations mean for addressing diversity in the museum. The work of designers such as Frederick Kiesler offers excellent templates for thinking outside the frame, paving the way for exhibition design to be more cognizant of a greater variation of embodied experiences in museum architecture. Despite this, museums still lag behind in thinking about this plethora of needs. In the current moment, it is contemporary disabled artists who are at the forefront of demonstrating how exhibitions can be designed so they consider the needs of disabled visitors first. Artists such as Finnegan Shannon design and produce art hand in hand with thinking about crip comfort as bodies navigate exhibitions through the spaces of the art gallery or museum. Disabled artists are the best resource for designing exhibitions and way-finding techniques for a greater spectrum of audiences, given that they bring intimate knowledge and lived experience of disabled body-minds.

Keywords

crip comfort
crip curation
disability art activism
elastic exhibition
design
Finnegan Shannon
Frederick Kiesler

Art museums today are showing more interest than ever in making spaces more accessible for a greater diversity of visitors, particularly disabled audiences. As a disabled art historian and curator, I recognize and applaud the

initiatives that many museums have taken, yet I see the same focus on specific aspects of museum architecture – such as the installation of ramps or elevators – that offer only the most basic level of access. Instead, museums should be encouraged to think beyond these elementary and foundational elements of access to look deeper at other often invisible and taken-for-granted architectural details that truly require transformation, such as the hang-height of artwork that assumes all bodies are of the same height. Or the fact that most museums are not comfortable because they lack areas where visitors can sit down and rest. For this reason, museums should and could responsively mould their spaces to the varied physical needs of gallery visitors, particularly through adjustable hang-heights of artwork or offering more seating. If museums were to focus on creating environments that were more flexible, elastic, adaptive and comfortable, they would be moving closer to spaces that are equitable to bodies of different shapes, sizes and needs. Disabled audiences could then partake in museum culture with more ease, enjoyment and equality.

In the early twentieth century, avant-garde exhibition designers and architects such as Frederick Kiesler were already developing elastic architectures that advocated diversity and comfort because they recognized that bodies needed more control over the environment, rather than the other way around. While it is true that much of the early work in exhibition design by visionaries such as Kiesler was never taken up with any consistency or as a blueprint for possible worldwide standards of exhibition display, it is contemporary disabled artists who are incorporating strategies similar to those of Kiesler to meet the multi-sensorial and multi-spatial needs for many types of audiences. Disabled artists are a compelling resource for designing exhibitions and way-finding techniques for a greater spectrum of audiences, given that they bring intimate knowledge and lived experience of disabled body-minds.

The article will interweave discussion on innovative exhibition design from both the past and the present. My primary historical source is the work of Kiesler, and how his exhibition design acts as a powerful precedent to the work of contemporary disabled artist Finnegan Shannon. As an extension to discussing Shannon's work, Henry Ford's assembly line and his original quest for efficiency and comfort through mechanisation have been adapted within a disability studies and exhibition design context. In considering these works, the intentions and effects that design bears on audiences are examined, along with how these new styles and micro-architectures are useful as a point from which to pivot museum displays in the future.

I have long advocated for access aesthetics and access-as-praxis in my curatorial activism, but museums must look further in their bid to make their environments more accessible, which means looking beyond the art objects on display, and beyond captions, alt text and image descriptions – or even to the tactile objects that may be integrated into work with creativity and criticality. Now, it is important to look at the foundations of the gallery itself – the floors, walls, ceilings, seating and lighting. The work of disabled designer and architectural historian David Gissen (2022) helpfully argues that disability-led design of exhibition displays starts with the disabled person in mind first, instead of simply thinking of display as needing to be made more accessible after the fact. Similarly, contemporary disabled artists use their time as exhibiting artists in museums to express deep concern and activism in the needs of their visiting disabled audiences, thereby consciously or unconsciously becoming leaders for how exhibition design can start with the disabled person

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in mind. To move ‘beyond ramps’ is to thus move to these other architectural components of the gallery, which are just as neglected as the assistive technologies that have become an indispensable part of the daily lived experience of disabled bodies, both inside and outside the museum.¹ If the supposedly fixed elements of the gallery – or even its invisible elements – now become felt, heard and touched, and if they become pliable and modifiable, this will also likely change the image-first nature of the museum visiting experience itself. Thus, constructing elastic worlds in the gallery involves constructing a radical politics of spectatorship.

1. ‘Beyond ramps’ also references the title of a book by Marta Russell (2002).

Adjustable Art

Frederick Kiesler was an avant-garde Austrian-American architect, theatre designer, sculptor and artist known for his bold and inventive experimentation with stage designs, who spent his time living in both Vienna and New York. Kiesler’s work will be examined over the contributions of other architects because his work resonates with the argument in this article, namely that his designs for adjustable installation and seating serve as a powerful template for how exhibitions can be made more responsive to the needs of the gallery visitor. Further, his work has not yet been considered within a disability studies and exhibition design context, which is extraordinary given how much can be learned from him, particularly at a time where museums desire to become more accessible spaces for a diversity of visitors. I argue that Kiesler’s avant-garde exhibition design imbued qualities of flexibility and adaptability, which has been influential on contemporary disabled artists such as Finnegan Shannon. Kiesler’s work demonstrates the intention to enhance the comfort of the disabled body, which reverberates in Shannon’s thinking about designing and creating exhibition installations.

In 1924, Kiesler conceived the Leger and Trägersystem (L+T System), which was a free-standing modular or ‘elastic’ construction used to present artworks as the main method of display for exhibitions (Phillips 2017). Adapting the idea of the Viennese *Gesamtkunstwerk* (‘total work of art’), Kiesler developed a holistic concept of design by using a unified geometrical formal language adapted from the Constructivist movement; this emerged in 1913 with Russian artist Vladimir Tatlin, who was inspired by Picasso’s paintings of fragmented bodies and objects characteristic of the Cubist movement also occurring at the time. Tatlin started to work with three-dimensional abstract collage made from wood and metal, and thus the notion of ‘construction’ became the basis for the movement, where art had to be built with tools instead of a brush. Constructivists also believed their cerebral work should reflect the industrial world around them and the realities of urban space. Their assemblages of industrial materials were typically abstract and formal, with the goal of testing the properties of materials. Kiesler deployed this approach to construct elaborate exhibition designs and sets, including the L + T system. He also developed other innovative means for installing paintings, which incorporated lighting and seating, particularly illustrated through his commission for Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century Gallery in New York in 1942.

The L+T system was groundbreaking exhibition architecture, which overcame what Kiesler called the ‘decorative bluff’ of traditional exhibitions (Museum Sztuki 2017). Given that the L+T system separated the artwork from the walls, this also had an impact on parsing out the relationship between art and decoration, where art could now be taken more seriously

(hence Kiesler's quip). Not only was the L+T system free-standing, but it was also demountable and portable, easy to take apart and reassemble. It was first utilised to display paintings at the Wien Konzerthaus in Vienna in *Internationale Ausstellung neuer Theatertechnik* (1924). The local authorities gave permission for Kiesler to use the space on the proviso that nothing be affixed to the perimeter walls of the room. Kiesler ironically felt liberated by the rules, eliminating the space between floor, walls and ceiling, whereby those features became a continuous whole rather than separate and distinct parts. The large room was filled with a grid-like formation of horizontal, vertical and diagonal supports, into which visitors had to immerse themselves, along with navigating the racks in order to experience the art. The walls were left blank, and visitors had to make up their own minds about which route they would take through the maze of supports, thus opening up the way-finding and navigational path of an exhibition so multiple stories could unfold, depending on the individual choices of the visitor. The exhibition included 600 drawings, posters, marionettes, photographs and stage designs by the leading playwrights, stage designers, filmmakers and artists of the day, including El Lissitzky, Leon Bakst, Alexandra Exter, Natalia Goncharova, Fernand Léger, Francis Picabia, Enrico Prampolini, Hans Richter and Oskar Schlemmer (Bogner 2005).

Kiesler, in my view, was inadvertently thinking about disabled audiences when he developed the L+T system. What was so brilliant about the system was that it was so adaptable, with viewers able to adjust the height of the display to suit their individual eye level. Simple wooden posts and slats were painted and bolted together in various combinations – some positions fixed and some adjustable by the viewer. Kiesler was 5 feet tall, so his shorter-than-average height likely impacted his desire for a more accessible viewing experience in the museum and gallery environment. Based on art historian Dieter Bogner's assertions, Kiesler wanted a design that could 'expand and contract in response to the movements and perceptions of the human body' and that would respond to the 'evolving spatial habits of bodies perceiving in time and motion' (Bogner 2005: 4). His elastic creation was meant to evoke the same fluidity as the human body so there was an ease of interaction with the technological surroundings and environment (Bogner 2005). There were two types of exhibition fixtures, the 'L' (Leger-type), which were more horizontal in nature and provided platforms at varying heights to facilitate multiple viewing angles. The 'T' (Trager-type) fixtures were vertical-oriented fixtures and held the various cantilever devices to move the displayed objects to positions chosen by the viewer. Each of the fixture types was capable of holding an individual lighting device, which added to the ambient light provided by the venue. Kiesler understood from his time in the theatre that lighting was essential in the evocation of mood, and given the theatrical content of the Vienna exhibit, it was necessary to provide that option to enhance viewer experience.

In later iterations of Kiesler's exhibition design work, specifically in the Surrealist Gallery at the Art of This Century gallery in New York City, he invented a similar suspension system of adjustable wooden arms which were affixed permanently to gallery walls, and paintings would then be attached to the end of the arms so that they hovered in space between twelve and thirty inches away from the wall. The paintings could then be tilted at different angles in a similar vein to flatscreen televisions being affixed to adjustable



Frederick Kiesler, west concave wall, Surrealist Gallery, Art of This Century, New York (1942). Photo: Berenice Abbott, © and courtesy of Austrian Frederick and Lillian Kiesler Private Foundation, Vienna.



Frederick Kiesler, installation view looking south, Surrealist Gallery, Art of This Century, New York (1942). Photo: Berenice Abbott, © and courtesy of Austrian Frederick and Lillian Kiesler Private Foundation, Vienna.

mounts drilled into the walls in domestic and public spaces. Given this new elastic characteristic of the paintings, they could now be moved to catch optimal lighting conditions for an individuated viewing experience. Historians talk of how Kiesler's invention lent itself well to the tropes of Surrealism, which was a predominant art movement of the time alongside Cubism (Bogner 2005). Kiesler's wooden levers morphed into human arms, tree limbs and even phallic symbols through sketches and drawings developed by him and his artist peers; however, there is little mention of how the elasticity of the invention critically serves a range of bodies within the viewing experience itself. Other discussions circulate on how the painting is liberated from its close relation to the wall, and how the artworks are freed from their imprisonment inside old-fashioned gilded frames (Bogner 2005).

As mentioned earlier, scholars deduce that both Kiesler's L+T system and his adjustable levers arose from his time as a theatre set designer, where he often thought of inventive ways to merge actors and spectators within a common space that comes alive with new narratives and stories (Bogner 2005). This also lent a more humanistic approach to his exhibition design that makes literal room for how different bodies experience viewing artworks in a gallery. His designs also demonstrate how important it is to think about objects and bodies communicating in symbiosis, rather than apart. It is potent to consider



Frederick Kiesler, Correalist Rocker and Correalist Instrument (1942). Photo: © and courtesy of Austrian Frederick and Lillian Kiesler Private Foundation, Vienna.

that Kiesler never saw his exhibition designs as supportive or ancillary to the paintings and original works of art; rather, each was equal to the other:

The traditional art object, be it a painting, a sculpture or a piece of architecture, is no longer seen as an isolated entity but must be considered within the context of this expanding environment. The environment becomes equally as important as the object, if not more so because the object breathes into the surroundings and also inhales the realities of the environment no matter in what space, close or wide apart, open air or in-doors.

(Kiesler 1965: 17)

Kiesler's philosophical approach to exhibition design surreptitiously made room for disabled bodies within the expanding environment he cites. Indeed, historians such as Dieter Bogner (2005) have mentioned that Kiesler's sketches and drawings often showed his exhibition supports assuming anthropomorphic forms in a bid to meld human form with objects so the devices were in harmony with our natural enfolded movement.

The Right to Rest and Conveyers of Power

Kiesler collaborated with several cabinetmakers to create custom pieces of furniture that consisted of instruments and rockers; these were very popular with gallery visitors, who wanted to purchase them (alas, they were not for sale). A typical example of the type of seating that Kiesler executed in the 1940s were organic in shape and evocative of curving or falling waves that were meant to encase the curves of the human body with ease (Quaintance 2005). Kiesler included these seating designs as part of Peggy Guggenheim's Art of this Century Gallery on 57th Street along with the adjustable painting levers discussed earlier. While the seating was also inspired by Surrealist qualities, echoing the character of the extended wooden painting levers, Kiesler evidenced an interest in the comfort of the gallery visitor by the highly attuned design and its ability to merge the object with the subject.

While much scholarship on Kiesler's seating spends time on its innovative and dynamic shape, and the multiple dynamic functions and multiple usages of the structures if turned in a different direction and to a new angle, less time is spent on the fact that Kiesler provided seating in the gallery in the first place (Quaintance 2005). Seating within the museum has historically and conventionally remained sparse, and this is to the detriment of the possible enjoyment of the spectator experience, which can be greatly diminished if the museum does not provide enough opportunities to rest and reflect on the artwork. Art historian Elizabeth Guffey (2015) reflects on her personal experiences in the museum: it became a battle to move around after she experienced waves of fatigue. The author makes a case for how museums can be exhausting for visitors, and how work needs to be done by museums to lower fatigue levels. Guffey advocates for more benches, which would ease the physical challenges she experiences navigating a museum as a person with mild cerebral palsy.

Guffey draws on curator and librarian Benjamin Ives Gilman (1916), who undertook a study of the condition of museum fatigue in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. As Gilman articulates, 'the photographs were taken with the object of determining by actual observation just what kinds and amounts of muscular effort are demanded of the visitor who endeavours to see exhibits as museum authorities plan to have them seen' (1916: 62). Gilman adds that 'museum fatigue' is an evil and that his study aims to offer suggestions for how to prevent it. He shows how the museum visitor must bend into uncomfortable positions to access information about the art, in the form of labels, didactics and so on. Indeed, to paraphrase Gilman, too much physical effort is demanded of the visitor, which greatly inhibits their ability to fully enjoy all aspects of what the museum has to offer (1916: 63). Clearly, both Guffey and Gilman would have approved of, and greatly valued, the material comforts that Kiesler was engaged with through his exhibition design and idiosyncratic seating. Once again, despite the fact that Kiesler was not immersed in studies or issues of museum fatigue and disabling experiences in the museum, his work nevertheless offers powerful prototypes for museums of today to embrace when thinking about the planning of their spaces.

Contemporaneously with Guffey's publication, New York-based artist Finnegan Shannon's work was starting to emerge in the contemporary arts scene. Seating has been a critical part of Shannon's practice for the past five years. Their institutional critique centres on the woeful inadequacy of the number of benches in museum and gallery spaces. Galleries usually only



Finnegan Shannon, Lone Proponent of Wall-to-Wall Carpet (2020), installation view of exhibition at Carlton University Art Gallery, Ottawa; wall foreground: Portable Mural 2 (2020), chipboard and ink; floor foreground: For when we need softness (2020), custom fabric and foam. Photo: Justin Wonnacott, courtesy of the artist.

accommodate standing positions. But for the artist, there can never be enough benches, and having many benches throughout the wayfinding experience of an exhibition is helpful to visitors and provides many opportunities to rest. Shannon's interventions – involving customized benches, a skill they have learned over time by working with various furniture fabricators – makes this absence visible.²

Their choice of blue (a colour that intentionally mimics the ADA Accessible sign of a person in a wheelchair) is loudly splashed across the upright back and flat seated area of the bench, with white pointed slogans in a signature, whimsical, self-styled font, such as 'Museum visits are hard on my body. Rest here if you agree', or 'I'd rather be sitting. Sit if you agree', or 'I focus better seated. Sit if you agree', or their most famous slogan, 'This exhibition has asked me to stand for too long. Sit if you agree'. The choice of words, along with the colour and even design of the bench – which does not mimic a conventional museum bench but rather a quirkier iteration – makes clear that this work is activist in its orientation. These are not benches that people may easily gloss over and mistake for common furniture. As Shannon worked with fabricators on the design of the benches, they consulted with the Smithsonian Museum Access Guidelines to ensure the benches were of the right proportions. They also took care to ensure that the benches were sturdy and could accommodate a range of body weights. Shannon's benches are always accompanied by labels that explicitly invite their visitors to sit, in a bid to break out of the usual and familiar pattern of not touching artworks.

2. For instance, Shannon's series of benches, *Do you want us here or not* (2018–ongoing), was produced in collaboration with the team of Walter Zanetti, Anthony Dewar and Paul Durocher from the School of Industrial Design, and Brant Lucuik, Azrieli School of Architecture and Urbanism, Carleton University.

The benches were the inspiration for Shannon's first solo exhibition at the Carlton University Art Gallery (CUAG) in Ottawa, Ontario, as their impact was keenly felt by the co-curators of the exhibition, Heather Anderson and Fiona Wright. *Lone Proponent of Wall-to-Wall Carpet* (2020) was a natural extension of Carlton University's profile and reputation as a campus that is one of the most accessible in Canada. Shannon collaborated with the curators in an organic fashion and was given a floor plan to map a cohesive narrative throughout the space. Given Shannon's emphasis on staging furniture in a meaningful and sensitive way, the floor plan was crucial. The exhibition featured portrait drawing and portable murals but was particularly notable for its debut of new furniture, cushions and carpet, which attempted to make the gallery a more welcoming and comfortable environment for visitors, especially visitors with disabilities. Shannon's furniture simultaneously functions as practical devices and tools for physical needs of its spectators in this exhibition, while providing a stark reminder of how most exhibition design lacks the provision of furniture and other resources for bodies to rest and feel comfortable. Shannon's exhibition design is therefore a template for how exhibitions and museums could improve their overall design concepts in the future for permanent comfort.

In an interview with Shannon (2022), the artist discussed wanting to centre the experience of disabled visitors coming to see their installations, given that a majority of institutions that invited disabled artists to show work do not have robust access programs for this segment of the population. Their mindset therefore shifted to think more broadly and holistically about creating a container for a wider range of bodies to experience the work. In this sense, a 'container' may be akin to 'exhibition design'. At first, Shannon was only interested in thinking about the access of the visitor, but this then extended into the process of making the exhibition accessible for themselves as well as an artist with a disability.

One of the first things Shannon noticed about the CUAG was that it had a thin layer of grey carpet, which is unusual for contemporary art spaces, as most are laid out in concrete or wooden floorboards. Shannon liked this aspect of the exhibition space, as it offered a cosier and more inviting atmosphere despite its large size. The artist used the carpet as an opportunity to integrate several locations where visitors could sit (on the carpet directly or on cushions), and they even included yoga mats so people could lay down on their backs or stretch on their stomachs to enjoy the exhibition. Shannon also installed several benches in the space that were functional artworks to be used by the public. Shannon's furniture could also be moved around the space at the discretion of the visitor. Often the floor of a museum or gallery is uninviting, but the carpet helped support Shannon's quest for a comfortable and accessible exhibition design with the experience of the visitor foremost in their thinking.

The title of Shannon's exhibition refers to the artist's acknowledgement that most curators, artists and exhibition designers dislike carpet, so they realize they are the 'lone proponent' or advocate for carpeted spaces. Most curators, artists and exhibition designers, however, do not consider the needs of disabled audiences. The experience of having carpet in their CUAG solo exhibition has since fed into Shannon's other projects, as they organized another smaller show later that same year in which they placed a small square cut-out of carpet in the gallery space. Shannon acknowledges that carpet does not necessarily work for all disabled people visiting an exhibition, given that some people may have allergies to carpet, based on its tendency to collect dust and



Finnegan Shannon, Do you want us here or not (2018–ongoing), Baltic birch, poplar wood and plastic laminate, installed in Lone Proponent of Wall-to-Wall Carpet (2020), Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa. Photo: Justin Wonnacott, courtesy of the artist.



Here to Lounge, Nook Gallery, Oakland, California (2020), curated by Finnegan Shannon. Photo: Courtesy of Soph Schultz Rocha.

contribute to bad air quality that could trigger asthma. People who use mobility devices such as wheelchairs may also have a harder time moving across carpeted surfaces. Still, the carpet created an atmosphere where people could treat the gallery almost like a living room, where objects could be touched, sat on and moved, resulting in a feeling of casualness and informality.

Around the same time as *Lone Proponent of Wall-to-Wall Carpet* was staged in Ottawa, Shannon curated an exhibition entitled *Here to Lounge* (2020), which consisted of work by close artist friends for the Nook Gallery in Oakland, California. These included Alex Dolores Salerno, Christine Sun Kim, Carly Mandel, Jeff Kasper, Jillian Crochet, Pelenakeke Brown, Rebirth Garments, Sandra Wazaz and Yo-Yo Lin. Shannon knew that they wanted tactility to be a larger part of their work compared with the CUAG show, so *Here to Lounge* was an opportunity to invite artists to provide small works that could be touched and fondled by the audience. The space was small and came with a built-in white booth. Shannon used this booth to have visitors explore the tactile objects, which were housed inside white trays placed on the table. Owing to the nook-quality of the space, this show felt more like a kitchen to Shannon, and the fact that the objects could be touched so candidly lent itself to being far more interactive than the CUAG iteration. Through the experience of seating at the table and touching objects, Shannon also facilitated social encounters between visitors, given the way the proximity of the furniture and tactile qualities allowed for more dialogical exchange. The artist made special cushions for the benches so that they were even more comfortable,

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Finnegan Shannon, Don't mind if I do (2023), views of exhibition opening, moCa Cleveland. Photo: Courtesy of McKinley Wiley, The Dark Room Co.

and included a Lazy Susan so visitors could access and pick up the tactile objects as they rotated. A sign on the wall offered a greeting: 'Welcome to this seating-centric space'.

Shannon was excited to invite other artists to engage in this platform with them. What started out as an invitation from Nook's curator to display solo work turned into a collaborative endeavour. They worked with fellow artists and modified the furniture elements of the space, along with increasing sensory input and output. Shannon's exhibition powerfully critiques the ableism of the museum and gallery environment. They deftly centre access as praxis to offer political commentary on how 'accommodations' for disabled artists and visitors alike are often patronizing and an after-thought. Through centring access as cogent subject matter worthy of unpacking, Shannon and their peers extend the provisions that support and shape their embodied needs to others, recognizing that all bodies are worthy of care.

As an extension to the interest in seating-centric exhibition design, and the use of a Lazy Susan in the Nook Gallery project, the artist developed a large-scale solo exhibition entitled *Don't Mind if I Do* (2023) for the Museum of Contemporary Art (moCa) in Cleveland. This project included a full-scale reconstituted conveyer belt. Curated by moCa curator Lauren Leving, in this show the artwork became mobile and travelled to the visitor, instead of the visitor walking over to see the typically stationary art. This revised flow of movement resists historic and ableist structures of museum engagement that suggest specific methods of movement and mobility are necessary to experience the work on display. Similar to their project at Nook Gallery, all the items on the conveyer belt could be picked up and touched, and the items themselves were supplied by a collective of Shannon's artist friends from the disability arts community. Some of the objects include 3D scans of small sculptures by Emilie Gossiaux, pom poms by Felicia Griffin, and tools for interpersonal interaction by Jeff Kasper. Other artists involved included Lukaza Branfman-Verissimo, Pelenakeke Brown, Rebirth Garments and Joselia Rebekah Hughes. Audience members became participants in this experimental project, as the artist encouraged visitors to handle artworks as a mode of haptic activism.

The conveyer belt was 25 feet (7.6 metres) long and organized in an elliptical shape that sat inside a wooden table structure built onsite. The mechanism weighed approximately 300 pounds (136 kilograms), and the conveyer belt was built in sections similar to a child's train set. For future iterations, it can be scaled according to the size of the gallery. In this vein, Shannon's project is akin to Kiesler's projects, which involve building and rebuilding exhibition forms into new configurations. As part of the installation, the artist purchased comfortable chairs and benches from Craigslist and placed them evenly around the conveyer belt, so visitors could take a seat and engage with the full sensorial qualities of the art while settled comfortably at the table. The artist has cited inspiration from conveyer belts used in sushi train restaurants as a model for her design, where the food comes to diners using a mechanical system and one chooses what to eat and enjoys it as they wish. The title of the work, *Don't Mind if I Do*, was a playful acceptance of such an invitation – similar to the casual remark one murmurs when grabbing a spicy tuna roll passing by. The exhibition will also be intentionally situated outside the conventional scope of museum exhibitions, as *Don't Mind if I Do* fosters visual and tactile encounters with artwork that supports experiential learning. Shannon's new project also shares an affinity to Kiesler's sensibilities in that both practitioners desire a more relaxed viewing experience for their audiences, which involves

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seating but also spaces where the art is within reach for an enhanced viewing experience.

When thinking about this work, I was struck by how the history of the conveyer belt and its relationship with disabled bodies provides an interesting tension with the artist's intervention. Shannon's project makes the conveyer belt work for the needs of disabled body-minds effectively, radically and with agency, yet there was a time in the not-so-distant past when the conveyer belt came with questionable attitudes to disabled bodies. Historian Sarah F. Rose traces a history of disability in the workplace, specifically within capitalist infrastructures that relied on a healthy and wholesome body that could speedily execute tasks for the good of a sustainable thriving economy. How, then, did disability (mis)fit into this polished and seamless system of labour? In 1913, Henry Ford's car factories in Detroit, Michigan became the first in the world to introduce conveyers and the concept of a moving assembly line so the labourer's actions could be reduced to simple repetitive tasks for the most efficient production of objects. Within this new system of mechanisation, disabled people had a place. Prior to Ford and his auto empire, disabled workers found it challenging to find employment as they were seen as unfit and unproductive compared with fully able-bodied employees. As Rose states, 'Henry Ford, however, challenged the simple equation of disabled



The Ford assembly line (1913). Photo: Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

people with inefficiency, demonstrating that workers with a broad array of disabilities could in fact be productive in the increasingly mechanized economy of the twentieth century' (2017: n.pag.). Ford stood apart from fellow capitalist entrepreneurs who failed to employ disabled workers, believing that the wonders of mechanisation helped to make disabled workers more employable, not less.

From the outset, this would seem as though disabled bodies had an amicable relationship with the Ford factories and their brand of scientific management towards workers' bodies, but these bodies – disabled or otherwise – were still treated as machine-like cogs interlocked on assembly lines with everyone else. Although the assembly line was more efficient, the workers themselves were still suspicious of it, and the conveyer gave Ford even more control over their bodies (Eschner 2016). Architectural historian Stephen Phillips also notes that:

Fordist practice [...] attempted to mold the body to the specialized demands of an efficient technological, mechanized workplace', while Kiesler was interested in the variation of technology itself so that it could adapt to 'evolutionary process of socioeconomic changes.

(Phillips 2010: 104)

Kiesler further notes that needs are not static and should evolve in the same way that bodily needs evolve; thus architecture should be organic and consist of a living machine that 'modulate[s] to one's motion in time as a consequence of one's societal and bodily habits' (2010: 104). In Kiesler's mechanization, there is mutually beneficial relationship between humans and technology – unlike Ford's technology, which put profit first. Kiesler did not want bodies to strain within an environment of fixed and repetitive actions such as those typical in the Ford factory; rather, he wanted architecture to ease the strain of the human and their relations to their tools. For Kiesler, technology engaging bodies in such harmony was a way to ensure the environment was balanced and provided a good tension between comfort and discomfort. Shannon's conveyer belt, then, might be seen as operating under Kiesler's beneficial design principles. However, while Shannon's new installation is aimed at empowering disabled bodies, the artist is also reconstituting a device (the conveyer belt) that has historically presented hardship to all kinds of bodies under labouring conditions. While the conveyer belt has presented many advantages to contemporary society in various environments and contexts, from shopping malls to airports or sushi trains, in Shannon's installation they literally turn the table on the spectatorship experience so it becomes one of leisure and radical activism for disabled bodies, where all can (re)claim the right to rest.

In this article, I have woven together a discussion of the visionary avant-garde exhibition design inventions of Frederick Kiesler with the work of disabled artist and curator Finnegan Shannon to build a connection between historical and contemporary work that prioritizes the needs of the museum and gallery spectator. Constructing elastic worlds in all the ways the artists have demonstrated emphasizes their keen sensitivity to the ways in which a range of bodies engage with the structures of the museum and gallery environment. While the rhetoric around Kiesler's work is not steeped in the politics of disability, his work provides a powerful schemata for how micro-architectures – or, to use interdisciplinary scholar

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and media-maker Arseli Dokumaci's (2023) phrase, 'activist affordances' – can be rendered in the art gallery so the museum becomes a more accessible and habitable place. In addition, contemporary disabled artists such as Shannon have established strong relational exchanges with curators, fellow artists, exhibition designers, educators, gallery and museum directors and other arts administrators to create institutional change that puts the disabled artist, visitor and user first. Through collaboration and dialogical exchange, artists have centred access as praxis, where benches, carpet, ramps, spaces to sit and reflect, and kinetic and haptic art have become the primary subject matter to engage in experimentation and critique. By inheriting a new role as exhibition designers, alongside that of traditional artist or curator, contemporary disabled artists are more empowered than ever to shake up the ableist foundations of museum and gallery culture, to reveal its inadequacies, and to advantageously use this hybrid role as an activist platform.

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