

Journal of Curatorial Studies  
Volume 14 Number 2

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[https://doi.org/10.1386/jcs\\_00132\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1386/jcs_00132_5)  
Published Online xx xxxx

**THE AGENCY OF ACCESS: CONTEMPORARY DISABILITY ART AND INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE, AMANDA CACHIA**

Philadelphia: Temple University Press (2024), 308 pp.,  
ISBN: 978-1-4399-2622-2, h/bk, \$94.50, p/bk and e-book, \$19.95

Reviewed by Alice Wexler, Independent Scholar

In *The Agency of Access: Contemporary Disability Art and Institutional Critique*, contemporary disabled artists address in earnest the ineffectiveness of accommodation in cultural institutions. The apartheid of education and visitor service departments charged with offering accommodations (e.g. ramps and wheelchairs) to the atypical body are felt by disability activists as obligatory and uncreative. Expanding accessibility beyond these departments opens up possibilities of more substantial and permanent changes. Rather than compliance with an accommodation checklist, disabled artists are challenging long-held western frameworks and the boundaries of art, culture and politics. The museum has become the site where these negotiations are taking place.

Artist Park McArthur has played a significant role in the creative restructuring of the museum. McArthur states in *The Agency of Access* that, 'I want to help change the very systems and structures that view my presence as an act of accommodation' (McArthur and Palmer 2015: n.pag.). McArthur's well-known work *Projects 195*, at the Museum of Modern Art from 2018 to 2019, demonstrates how museum architecture might be transformed into a flexible and unfixed space that affords all types of bodies an inclusive environment based on individual abilities. Other artists in *The Agency of Access*, with their additional role as curators and exhibition designers, set out to challenge and disrupt typical ways of moving through space by problematizing ocular-centrism and foregrounding the other senses. Access devices, such as ramps, take centre stage by becoming, as Cachia articulates, both 'disruptive and accessible at the same time' (192). For example, blind artist/curator Carmen Papalia's many roles in his exhibitions have established new models of exhibition design that have become integrated with the architecture, thus enduring beyond a single exhibition.

One of the critical issues, therefore, is to move the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) beyond its official requirements. While an important landmark in disability rights, it does not protect disabled people against microaggressions in the workplace, significant delays in following through accommodation requests and retaliatory behaviour from colleagues, all of which create what disability studies scholar Anika M. Konrad (2021) calls 'access fatigue'. Conversely, access intimacy requires a collaborative imagining of what could be created in the future. Cachia writes that intimacy must be

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1. achieved otherwise, through 'the development of individual and collective (re)  
2. orientations, ways of being responsive to our primary interdependence' (24).

3. Thus, the mantle has been passed to the artist/curators who live with  
4. disability, often working in partnership with institutional curators, some of  
5. whom also have atypical bodies. They approach accessibility both conceptually  
6. and materially, depending on the various access needs, and thus create  
7. public awareness of the depth and complexity of accessibility. When accommodation  
8. has transformed into access that is personal, intimate, relational and  
9. creative, access becomes inseparable from ways of belonging. In other words,  
10. the sensory experience of moving through space and getting to the endpoint  
11. together, and everything that happens *before* arriving at a desired location  
12. through ramps and wheelchairs, needs to be reinvigorated. The concept of  
13. obligatory accommodation has run its course.

14. Over the past two decades, Cachia has been a leading disability figure  
15. in the art world. *The Agency of Access* is a comprehensive book about the  
16. artistic and curatorial movement to 'de-normalize' art institutions. She calls  
17. on several activist artists and curators with whom she has worked since  
18. 2011, who move beyond the obligatory access checklist and into the realm  
19. of multisensory embodied knowing. As she writes in the preface, 'I have  
20. witnessed this art from my own unique embodied disability, and I curate  
21. from my lived experience and phenomenological standpoint' (ix). The artists,  
22. who have diverse disabilities, work from their distinctive perspectives but  
23. have in common the disabled embodiment that serves as a doorway to new  
24. knowledges and a multisensorial aesthetic of curation that she has coined  
25. 'creative access'. Creative access, or access as praxis, is at the heart of this  
26. book, in which access becomes the artistic medium or subject matter and,  
27. at the same time, involves exhibition design re-visioned by contemporary  
28. disabled artists.

29. The book is divided into five chapters that forefront the artists' visions, as  
30. observed by Cachia through interviews, curatorial collaborations and her own  
31. reflections. Cachia makes relevant connections with art historical events that  
32. afford the reader a contextualized understanding of the access intimacy movement  
33. in progress. Throughout, Cachia reminds the reader that her purpose in  
34. writing this book is to bring attention to contemporary artists/curators such as  
35. Carmen Papalia, Christine Sun Kim, Carolyn Lazard, Alison O'Daniel, Corban  
36. Walker, Shawanda Corbett, Pelenakeke Brown, Fayen d'Evie, Sugandha  
37. Gupta, Wendy Jacob and Park McArthur, who invite dynamic sensory experiences  
38. by disrupting vision as the predominant sense that typically leads visitors  
39. through the exhibition space. The artist/curators are inviting museum  
40. visitors into what Cachia calls a 'private language of difference' (4), in which  
41. they might actively participate.

42. Creative access is aligned with disability justice by bringing the reader's  
43. attention to the taken-for-granted, normalized, exclusionary practices of the  
44. museum, such as its communication systems that are unconscious of the disabled  
45. spectator. As Cachia explains, 'In simple terms, translation is the act of  
46. communicating meaning and information across languages, from one source  
47. to a supposed equivalent source' (30). Disabled artists are cognizant of the  
48. need to radicalize translation to share the multiple and, often invisible, ways  
49. of being that comprise their lived lives. For instance, Carmen Papalia shares  
50. complex embodied experiences for and among gallery visitors. In a series of  
51. artworks, the artist invites pairs of participants into spontaneous visual translations  
52. and visual descriptions as 'an experience of the original work itself'

(38). Cachia calls his work a social and communitarian intervention in which audio description is a pedagogical, poetic and creative act, which highlights the limitations of assumptions about the objectivity of this standard museum programming. Cachia advances such notions as Arseli Dokumaci's (2018) audio-description techniques, which become what Dokumaci calls 'disability as method', toppling the appearance and limitation of neutrality and replacing it with the subjectivity of the captioner's interpretations.

The book brings attention to the important historical precedents for sensory and alternative art and curation, by both disabled and non-disabled artists and curators such as the Dadaists, Futurists and Fluxus. These efforts refocused the museum's traditional visual experience towards a disorienting perceptual experience in a complex external environment. The distinction between disabled and non-disabled artists in this work is that disabled artists already embody the alternative multisensory experiences they use to invite richer interactions between the audience and the artwork. They thus acquaint the non-disabled audience with atypical disabled sensory experience. Cachia defers to Patty Berne, Daniel Buren, Adrian Piper and Martha Rosler, who opened the way for the transformation of the institution space. The deaf artist Joseph Grigely, for example, has been writing letters to museum curators and leaders in the field about their lack of awareness of access needs. Cachia quotes Grigely's definition of disability art as what 'many disabled artists now love to do: crip normative experiences and conventions and return to the audience the complications of disability' (16).

*Agency of Access* is grounded in the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (2012) lived experience and embodied perception, materialism's 'enfleshed experiences of disability' (22) and Sarah Ahmed's (2006) emphasis on the queer body and other varieties of humanity that reshape 'the norms, values, and beliefs structuring our world' (24). Cachia employs David T. Mitchell's and Sharon L. Snyder's (2000) materialism in which the disability experience actively creates meaning, as well as Tobin Siebers's (2013) concept of 'complex embodiment', which challenges the myth of normality and the notion of ability.

The preparation and writing of this book began well before the 2024 US presidential election, the result of which has generated unprecedented obstacles for disability futures. Disabled artists and other activists in the art world have always been protagonists for social justice; this book will become even more significant in the current context. In her role as disability curator, activist, designer, scholar and educator, Cachia has explored what will become a formidable challenge to the museum's status quo. The challenge here is how to sustain such projects in the present and future beyond the realm of temporary exhibitions. That will probably depend on the will and the budget of the museums whose futures, like those of other cultural institutions, are uncertain. Disability activist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) asks people to wake up and act *as if* the revolution has already happened. 'As if' is a powerful concept. When activists think 'as if', the world follows.

The permanent changes that Cachia seeks might be distilled into the following points: disability agency in art institutions, rigorous institutional critique, and an 'overhaul of the field of art history at large' (9). *The Agency of Access* is a reflective culmination of more than ten years of Cachia's work with disabled artists and their collaborative exhibitions. Her book fills the gaps in the limited but growing scholarship on *disability as method* and the sensorial evolution in museum disability aesthetics.

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