trying to engage and learn from a path to access. As scholar Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha highlights, it is a journey, one rife with failure—hopefully generative failure—collaboration, interdependency, and solidarities.[5] We are not finished with this work, and both of us hope to carry it on in dialogue with artists in our upcoming exhibitions, as citizens in our current political state, and in our communities.

1. See Johanna Hedva, "Sick Woman Theory," Topical Cream Magazine, March 12, 2022, https://topicalcream.org/features/sick-woman-theory/.
2. Amanda Cachia, "Crip Curation and the Aesthetics of the Undeliverable," Journal of Visual Culture 22, no. 3 (2023): 1.
3. Aruna D'Souza, Imperfect Solidarities (Berlin: Floating Opera Press, 2024), 24.
4. Johanna Hedva, How to Tell When We Will Die: On Pain, Disability, and Doom (Los Angeles: Hillman Grad Books, 2024), 15.
5. See Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018).

A Radical History of Chronic Agency

III.

Disability art is a visual arts movement that emerged in the post-1990 United States, United Kingdom, and other Western nations to consider the role and diversity of images of the body in visual culture. Arising out of the Disability Rights movement of the 1980s, disability art is concerned with awareness, representation, and social justice around the lived experience of disability. Disability art discourses and the retelling of art history through a minority lens gradually gained traction in the twenty-first century. Disabled artists have explicitly aimed to offer bold self-acceptance of their bodies through playful, confrontive, and revisionist representations—even spectacles. These representations come as a reaction to the stigmatizing gaze from non-disabled publics, where disabled people have been made to feel ashamed of the way they look and occupy space. While literal representations of disabled bodies have been important to revise and challenge ableist assumptions and negative stereotypes, disabled artists have also used other means to express a visual activism that deploys tropes outside and beyond the body itself. Their work has demonstrated varied interests that range from explorations of the sensorium, disabled language, the tools of access, institutional critique, and alternatives to the medical model of disability, which still pervades ableist culture, and this essay will touch on these various approaches. The medical model of disability draws on conventional and persistent perceptions in mainstream society of disability as something to be corrected or fixed because it is inherently wrong. The medical model is adamantly refuted by the social model of disability, which flips the script to argue

instead that it is society which disables the individual. Given its heavy shroud, it has long been the imperative of disabled people to resist the medical model of disability.

One of the most important mantras to emerge from the Disability Rights and Disability Arts movements—which grew out of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and dates to the1970s, with key figures including Ed Roberts, Judy Heumann, Billy Golfus and Justin Dart—was "nothing about without us."[1] On March 12, 1990, the historic Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) protest took place, where disabled activists got out of their wheelchairs and climbed up the steps of the Capitol building in Washington, DC. This event is more commonly known as the "Capital Crawl." Activists brought awareness to the very slow progress of legislative change. They were advocating for curb cuts, access to buildings, accessible transportation, deinstitutionalization, and better community services. In their act of disruptive mobility, they effectively transported their identities into a radical sphere of equal participation, citizenship, and agency; and, at the same time, they called attention to their minority status as their crawl through public space became spectacle and performance, making it impossible for people to look away.

Disability art in its beginnings was a moment of great power and energy, when the movement was experimental and raw. Importantly, numerous pathbreaking disabled artists working in the 1970s and '80s laid a foundation for subsequent generations of artists. For example, performance and conceptual artists, including Rebecca Horn and Agnes Martin, helped pave the way for contemporary disabled artists who have brought disability concerns to a broader audience. Bob Flanagan and Chuck Close made work about their corporeal conditions, while many other activist artists working in the 1980s responded to the AIDS epidemic. Other artists, such as Yayoi Kusama,

Lisa Bufano, David Hockney, Darrel Ellis, and Alice Rahon, are worth mentioning for their standout work that draws attention to representations of the atypical body. These perspectives did not benefit from art historical criticism and scholarship that intersects with disability studies, owing to the time their work emerged into the world. Since the renowned act of protest via the Capital Crawl, disabled artists have examined the act of seeing and being seen, creating works that redirect the ableist gaze. They have worked in the wake of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), finally signed into law by President George H. W. Bush on July 26, 1990, as the Disability Rights movement burgeoned.

Some of the artists who shaped the Disability Arts movement and pushed it forward include Riva Lehrer, Katherine Sherwood, Sunaura Taylor, Chun-Shan (Sandie) Yi, Carrie Sandahl, Leroy Moore, Mary Duffy, Joseph Grigely, and the artists associated with Sins Invalid. They emerged within hubs of disability activism in Chicago and the Bay Area, paving the way for new social justice movements. These artists were practicing at a time when the academic discipline of disability studies was starting to take root. In these early years, the medical model of disability especially resonated with many of the abovementioned disabled artists, who attempted to address this perspective in their praxes. While it is true that artists such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Bob Flanagan made work about their own forms of health and illness throughout the 1980s and '90s, these artists have typically been considered part of the mainstream art discourse, while the work of contemporary disabled artists is often sidelined. Notably, Gonzalez-Torres and Flanagan never identified as disabled, nor did they use the language of disability to engage with their own work, either in the studio or publicly.

Today, there are many younger-generation disabled artists who

vehemently reject the medical model of disability in their art. They respond to the medical industrial complex's oppression of minorities and disabled people in ways that are intersectional, political, accessible, and aesthetic. Such contemporary artists dedicated to these themes include Dominic Quagliozzi, Carolyn Lazard, Bhavna Mehta, Jesse Darling, Robert Andy Coombs, Panteha Abareshi, Black Womxn Flourish, Feminist Health Care Research Group, Power Makes Us Sick, Sick Affinity Group, Park McArthur, Constantina Zavitsanos, Lauryn Youden, Sharona Franklin, and many others. In this exhibition, *How do you throw a brick through the window...*, they include Yani aviles, Chloe P. Crawford, Nat Decker, Jeff Kasper, Carly Mandel, Jeffrey Meris, and Libby Paloma. To be a disabled or immunocompromised artist today is not to be so unusual. These artists are interested in charting immunocompromised bodies, making medical assistive and prosthetic devices strange, coupling disability with sexuality, launching feminist/queer collectives of care, and uncovering alternative medicines as new systems of support and care.

From 2010 onwards, the art being produced by contemporary disabled artists has witnessed a pronounced shift, expressing less concern with representations of disability and the nature of the body in visual culture. These artists provide an influential new template, using language and appealing to the senses in their practices. Notable figures of this work include, Stephen Lapthisophon, Aaron Williamson, Noemi Laikmaier, Christine Sun Kim, Carmen Papalia, Alison O'Daniel, and Finnegan Shannon. Such artists have developed a methodology that both denies and demonstrates access in the gallery space, drawing from the rich tradition of institutional critique deployed by renowned artists of an earlier generation, like Marcel Broodthaers, Michael Asher, Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren, Fred Wilson, Adrian Piper, Martha Rosler, and Andrea Fraser.

As institutional critique was becoming a serious focus for disabled artists in 2010, a new genre called "access aesthetics" or "creative access" was beginning to take hold in artistic circles. Access aesthetics is interwoven with institutional critique and disability justice, and became an important intervention through the work of Jenny Sealey, artistic director of Graeae Theatre Company in London, and other pioneers in the field. Like the other themes and topics covered in this essay, access aesthetics is very much a political project, one that aims to center translation, sensory-expansion, touch, and movement for audiences to offer an experience of "being with" disability. By making inequities in the museum more transparent, artists demand agency, voice, empowerment, and social justice. This new form of disability art is a vehicle to topple the conventional, mono-sensorial standards that have become entrenched within museum and gallery cultures. In this new frame, a relational exchange with other objects and bodies is key to unlocking rigid regimes around texts, sounds, and images. In this work, the mediums of description, notation, sign language, transcription, and tactile objects are wielded with great fluency by contemporary disabled artists.

Access aesthetics continues to evolve as both a philosophy and a praxis that meets the urgencies of our current moment—a time marked by global pandemics, climate crisis, political polarization, and renewed struggles for equity and care. Disabled artists remind us that access is not a static checklist but a creative, relational act that reimagines how we gather, communicate, and sense together. As institutions and audiences confront questions of inclusion and accountability, the radical history of disability art calls us toward deeper forms of interdependence and collective access. The work of contemporary disabled artists demonstrates that advocacy and aesthetics are inseparable: each artwork becomes an act of resistance and imagination, insisting that access is not a privilege but a shared cultural practice essential to the future of art and social justice.

1. James I. Charlton, Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

Lemons on the Step: Agitrop and Poems with Teeth