

**Beyond Excuses: Rethinking Disability and Accessibility in Institutions and Society**

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## Preface:

As preface to this writing, I, the author, am a Practicing Visual Artist and activist for disability rights in both contemporary art and society. This writing will take the form of a Layered Account as a form of autoethnographic research to challenge the conventional academic writing style. This writing form will allow personal experience to interpret, discuss and communicate messaging from a diverse range of sources. All sources and research, however, shall be interpreted and discussed critically. Personal experience will allow me, the author, to apply understanding more effectively because the topic is an underlying representation of the communities of which I am a part.

## Introduction:

This essay examines key misinterpretations of disabled practice and the role of accessibility in contemporary art. An initial contextualisation of disability art within broader contemporary art practices will aim to inform and educate the reader in their understanding before further themes are explored and ideas discussed. Post contextualisation, four main themes will be discussed, examined, demystified and critically evaluated. A common theme in this essay is the "Misunderstandings Surrounding Disability Art." This theme will be analysed and presented in several forms. The first form of misunderstanding takes form in analysing and interpreting the mode of practice for disabled artists and the existing bias that sees artists as a monolithic entity of limitless creation unbound by the body's limitations. This misunderstanding that an artist is a singular being and not a symbiotic relationship between one's mind and soul and one's physical body is a common bias when interpreting one's method of practice due to the historically reinforced belief that one becomes an artist through the learnings of techniques and styles in institutions and not through the conveyance of experiences and ideologies through sensory mediums.

The second theme of misinterpretation is the misunderstandings of curated works of disabled artists and the inability of spaces and audiences to see disabled art through the gaze of Disability. The writing will use sources to highlight how the societal teachings and beliefs surrounding Disability cause a disconnection from providing spaces and opportunities for the audiences to view and perceive disabled art through the eyes of the artist. Misunderstandings will also take form in the context of presence. It will explore how the inaccessibility of both academic and curatorial institutions results in the understanding that disabled artists do not exist or are not present. Due to inaccessibility, artists cannot exist in these institutions. If not allowed to exist, disabled artists constantly have to battle to make themselves present. Another explored theme in this writing is *The Concept of transmutation as a unique approach to disabled practice*. Using a case study of Park McArthur, this essay will explore the significance of transmutation as an essential tool for disabled practice. This writing will also explore the reception of transmitted works from the audience's perspective and how, as a tool, it can effectively highlight societal ignorance of Disability art. This writing will also discuss the theme of *The Existence of Accessibility as a Ethical Imperative*. This theme explores the diverse modes of accessibility within contemporary art and how artists currently utilise them.

The paper will also explore new technologies available to institutions to provide better accessibility. Accessibility is an opportunity not just for those with disabilities but will also explore how accessibility benefits society. Finally, this writing will interpret "The influence of Non-Disabled audiences on artistic value". This Theme explores how interpretations of Disability in art provide and retract value from art depending on its aesthetic values and contextual presentation. It will explore how the post-mortem categorisation of artists as disabled adds value to artists of the past yet overshadows the existence and work of disabled artists in the contemporary. This essay may discuss unique terms; therefore, definitions of these are essential. 'Disabled Gaze' refers to a way of seeing and experiencing the world through the eyes of someone with Disability; the concept of 'Gaze' is key to understanding many of the themes within contemporary art by providing a lens to view. The labels 'Disabled' and 'Able' and other seen variations in this essay are a means of simplifying contrasting experiences and points of discussion and viewpoint to highlight inherent societal ableism and not to simplify or demean the existence of any individual to either categorisation Disability has a broad spectrum of definitions and presentations and the reference to being 'Able' is not to assume an individual as ableist inherently.

# Contextualising Disability art in Contemporary Practice

## Background:

### Sick Woman Theory – Disabilities presence in the modern day

To begin contextualising disability art in the realm of contemporary practice, it is quintessential to understand that societal constructs and attitudes to disability are the root causes that dictate the experience and treatments disabled artists face in contemporary art practice. Understanding the systemic ableism that exists in society is the first step in the process of contextualising disability art. Johanna Hedva provides valuable insights. Johanna Hedva's writing titled Sick Woman Theory is a direct critique of society's attitudes to disability and its inherent biases that cross over into the art world. Hedva provides not just an analysis but an in-depth analysis of her treatment in society, not just as a disabled person but also as a woman. It is important to understand that the contextualisation of disability in contemporary art was preceded by LGBTQ+ rights and women's rights to exist equally in society and also the contemporary art world. It is an undeniable reality in the contemporary world that the current political state heavily dictates the state of contemporary art, even when it is not directly linked to content. The link between the two is ever present in the attitudes and institutional structures. Hedva describes "Sick woman theory" as a highlight of how vulnerability and illness are often politicised and feminised often making the individuals themselves invisible in traditional political spheres (Hedva), and with this definition, it is easy to dissect the core realities for disabled artists in contemporary art. Suppose we understand contemporary art not to be a monolithic entity in nature. In that case, we must, however, acknowledge that contemporary art as a whole is an ongoing analysis and exploration of life and society. Suppose Contemporary art is a tool to explore these lived experiences and the environments in which they exist. In that case, it is impossible to ignore the similarities between Hedva's writings on disabled political existence and that disabled existence is more factually nonexistent in contemporary art. In her writing, Hedva discusses Hannah Ardent's definition of the political, which is one of the most used in the mainstream, which is that the political is any action performed in public (Hedva, 2020). Hedva begins her writing by discussing the implications of this definition for those who are disabled or cannot physically be present in this form of politics due to illness, disability or a wide range of restraints. Hedva's analysis, "If being present in public is what is required to be political, then whole swathes of the population can be deemed a-political—simply because they are not physically able to get their bodies into the street" (Hedva, 2020) can be applied to that for disabled artists in the contemporary art world. If being an artist is defined by their ability to be present in institutions and practice art as the world understands it, then disabled artists cannot exist. This speaks to the first point of contextualising disabled artists in the contemporary; with the current understandings and beliefs of what it is to be a contemporary artist then, disabled artists are not allowed to exist, yet they do exist. Therefore, it can be understood that the underlying context of disability art practice is to exist in a space that prevents its existence. Accessibility and methods of practice used by disabled artists are ways to forcefully prove their existence in the contemporary to redefine institutional and societal attitudes. Hedva also calls for this redefinition of the political to include care, support and access for marginalised people and advocates for radical kinship and community care as a form of resistance to capitalistic exploitation (Hedva, 2020). Hedva challenges the norm of illness being temporary and wellness being the standard of existence in the current capital structures; this theme is seen throughout other sources explored in this writing and highlights the idea that contemporary art attitudes reflect society. This points to another contextualisation of disability practice, which is that disability art practice in the contemporary art world is seen as an excuse for practice and not as a solution to the institutional problems faced in society and the art world. Disability art is art and not to be seen as an excuse for art. However, in the world of contemporary art, disabled artists face the constant challenge of having to show that their art is not an excuse for practice because of their disability; for non-disabled artists, any form of practice is viewed as a method of creation and not as an excuse, yet the same cannot be said for the practice of disabled artists. Institutional biases and capitalism further overshadow disability art in contemporary practice. Instead of allowing disabled artists to exist to show the diversity of contemporary art and society. In society, disability is viewed as a temporary form of existence; Hedva describes wellness as the standard and temporary curable illness as the only alternative. As this is the state of society currently, it is easier for institutions to label now deceased artists of the past as disabled to demonstrate a façade of inclusivity rather than highlight and accept that disabled existence is not something to cure, but to accept and allow to exist in the contemporary art world.

### Case Study: Park McArthur Ramps Exhibition and Interview



Park McArthur, *Ramps*, 2014. Installation view at ESSEX STREET, New York.

Park McArthur's ramps exhibition and subsequent interview with BOMB magazine provide an insight into Disability art, highlighting its accessibility and interpretations providing a key example of the interactions between disabled artists and contemporary art institutions. McArthur's Ramp's exhibition is a collection of ramps borrowed from various Art institutions, studios, residency spaces and galleries (BOMB,2014). The ramps document her journey as a disabled artist in a wheelchair throughout her time in New York and, therefore, are personal to her journey. McArthur's exhibition highlighted the absurdity of accessibility in art spaces and institutions, ramps being the bare minimum to accessibility. The exhibition highlights how the temporary solution to accessibility is ultimately inaccessible due to underfunding and architectural reasons. The exhibition is a compelling critique and a display of performative access in art institutions; the display of these ramps is effective in displaying the diverse, often inadequate responses art institutions and society have to disability. The concept that these ramps are just a means of entering a space and their inherent failure provokes thought on what the accessibility inside these spaces might be, that is if accessibility inside exists at all. The exhibition is successful in reinforcing society's inherent ableism, which denies the opportunity for Disabled people to enter a space so that they may exist in institutions and reinforces that if people with physical disabilities are nonexistent in spaces, the accessibility in the space itself, which allows people with other disabilities to exist in art institutions may not be present and therefore this physical barrier to existence or the "Bare Minimum" as described by McArthur in her interview inherently assumes the accessibility methods beyond a simple ramp do not exist in these spaces.

In her interview with Jennifer Burris in BOMB magazine (Bomb,2014)], McArthur discusses the economic and social limitations of accessibility in Art and society. McArthur describes how the current economic structure bases itself on high production, with jobs having limiting criteria disabled people cannot or might not meet. This idea proposes that if someone with a disability cannot meet the criteria, does this mean that the support structures for assisting disabled people in meeting this criterion of high production should not exist? This situation results in Disabled people having to rely on welfare structures that are constantly vanishing in the modern day. This understanding of the current socioeconomic structure that exists today is reflective of the inability of Abled individuals to view the world through the lens of the "Disabled Gaze". Suppose society is unable to provide accessibility so that disabled people can exist in our economic and social structures as individuals capable of production and value. What does this mean in the world of contemporary Art? It is because of this ableist structure that the audience often misunderstands Art created by disabled artists. If society sees disabled people as incapable of producing, then disability practice and Art are non-products compared to the rest of Art. If Art created by abled artists is Art, then it is to be believed that Art created by disabled artists is non-art. These ableist beliefs are highlighted by McArthur's beliefs on how her exhibition work was interpreted and treated by the audience on its opening day. The audience's misinterpretation of McArthur's work is a stark reminder of the systemic bias in society and the art world and the need for a more inclusive perspective.

McArthur, being in a wheelchair, curated and saw her exhibition from the perspective of someone with a disability, being disabled she only ever saw from the disabled gaze; however, when abled individuals came to view it, she realised in their documentation that "There are photographs of the ramps from a perspective that I have never seen personally"(BOMB,2014) this highlights an initial disconnect from the able-bodied audience, unable to view the works as imposing grand obstacles as they are to someone with a disability like McArthur herself. When an audience gathered, McArthur reflects on how abled individuals, unrestricted by the constant self-awareness in space that comes with a disability, were 'jumping on the ramps rather than just stepping on them to go from one place to another'(BOMB, 2014). McArthur never anticipated this reaction from the audience due to them being an imposing obstacle to people with disability. To McArthur, "these ramps are apprehending you rather than the other way around". The reaction of able-bodied individuals to McArthur's exhibition can be seen as an utter invalidation of the objectives the McArthur exhibition aimed to

produce. Instead of being able to view the works from the disabled gaze, the audience who do not face the same challenges to accessing spaces that disabled people have were unable to view the ramps as the intended obstacles to get from one place to another but instead as ways of moving through the exhibition, an experience antithetical to the one McArthur aimed to provide the audience. Whilst in the context of Art, McArthur's exhibition can be interpreted as a failure in conveying its message, the audience's reaction to McArthur's exhibition can be seen as a performative work unintentionally created by McArthur. The audience's reaction to McArthur's work is a manufactured reflection of society's attitudes and understanding of disability. The idea that the unconscious ableism reinforced by institutions is so poignant that individuals cannot comprehend the reasoning for the existence of ramps, let alone accessibility, because, to the able-bodied, the concept of disabled people does not exist in their workplaces, schools and institutions. Therefore, the concept of ramps as a means of access to anything more than a pram does not exist, and therefore, the disabled gaze, even if achieved temporarily, cannot be understood permanently. Overall, this case study of the McArthur ramps exhibition and BOMB interview is practical for critically analysing performative access measures in art institutions. The case study effectively explores the concept of the disabled gaze. It discusses the interpretations from an abled audience and unintended interpretations that highlight the systemic bias in society and Art.

## Transmutation in Disability Art

Before discussing Transmutation as a form of art practice in contemporary art, it is important to define its base word, Transmute. "Transmute – Verb: to change or alter in form, appearance, or nature and especially to a higher form" (Merriam-Webster) found in the Merriam-Webster dictionary is essential to understanding the topic of Transmutation in this essay. Disabled artists often use Transmutation as a form of art practice, placing objects from one environment and presenting them in another, as seen in the Park McArthur ramps exhibition, or physically transforming something that already exists into something else entirely. However, whilst seen as a valid use of practice for non-disabled artists, this essay will explore how, when used by disabled artists, Transmutation is seen as an excuse for contemporary art practice and how attitudes invalidate the work of these disabled artists entirely. This essay will also discuss the broader implications of transmutation as a form of practice, whether it is a method to provide accessibility or a result of inhibitions to other forms of art practice.

### Tony Heaton: Golden Lamé



Tony Heaton, *Golden Lamé*, 2014, Liverpool Plinth 2018-2019, Material: Fibreglass, Steel, Automotive paint

4'6 x 9'9

Tony Heaton's *Golden Lamé* is a transmuted art piece that explores the alchemical idea of turning base metal into gold to give something value (Heaton Tony, 2014). Heaton is a physically disabled sculptural artist who was disabled in a biking accident in his early adulthood; being given an invader from the NHS to provide mobility, he discusses the inherent ableism behind the vicar. The cars were all NHS blue, later nicknamed "Spaz Blue" by the general public (Heaton, 2014). The car was a single seater, which further implied the idea that those who are disabled are isolated and have no one to take transport with. The *Golden Lamé* is a prime example of how disabled artists can use transmutation to create impactful contemporary art. However, Heaton highlights that the curator for his *Golden Lamé* denigrated his work as just reusing something already existing. This idea is not an isolator belief facing disabled artists; the idea that transmutation is an excuse as a form of practice for disabled artists can also be seen in the reception of the Park McArthur ramps exhibition. The commonality of non-disabled audiences and curators not understanding transmutation as a form of practice stems from a societal belief in disability and the inherent inability to see through the eyes of disabled artists. Whilst disabled artists provide the context of their work, thus validating its existence as contemporary art, the current societal and institutional structures invalidate these transmuted forms.

## Broader Implications of transmutation

Transmutation exists as an essential form of practice for disabled artists; I aim to discuss and explore the consequences this has, both negative and positive, as the previous examples from both Tony Heaton and Park McArthur have demonstrated. Transmutation as a form of practice in the context of disability art seems to fail in its reception with non-disabled audiences. Transmutation seems to fail in providing non-disabled audiences with the ability to view disability art from the perspective of a disabled individual. To understand its failures as a form of practice, it is important to understand why it is so essential for disabled artists in the first place: inaccessibility. Disabled artists face limitations, whether physical or mental. The traditional forms of painting on canvas, clay sculpture, and textiles, for example, all require some form of physicality, such as strength, mobility or the ability to endure long periods of these things. For the non-disabled artist, these things are easy and are taken for granted; however, for the disabled artist, the inaccessibility of these methods means they cannot have freedom of practice. Art practice's institutional and societal standards mean transmutation is the easiest and most accessible option for many disabled artists. However, I believe that because there is widespread inaccessibility in practice, and transmutation is the only option when the non-disabled audience views disability artworks, the context of the works themselves is diluted by the pure number of transmuted works from disabled artists. Non-disabled individuals who are already impacted by systemic views and beliefs are further pushed into negligence for disabled art by the lack of diversity in practice. This issue is not the fault of disabled artists themselves but of the systemic oppression of disabled people in art and society. The solution to this issue is to provide accessibility to disabled artists so that their practice does not limit them. If diversity of practice was made available to disabled artists, the non-disabled audience would be less affected by the dilution of disability art practice.

However, it is also important to signify transmutation's effectiveness in providing accessibility in contemporary art. Many disabled artists, being forced to make spaces accessible for themselves to exist, create accessible art despite their works taking the form of transmutation. The ramp was organised and installed at the ESSEX Gallery in New York in collaboration with the Park McArthurs Ramps exhibition (BOMB, 2014), and it is a new form of unrecognised practice, the practice of accessibility. Accessibility as a facilitatory form of transmutation art practice provides a key development in the future of disabled art practice as a whole and may be a solution to the dilution caused by transmutation art practice.

## Innovating Accessibility for the Future

### Challenging Accessibility - Carolyn Lazard: Long Take Exhibition



Carolyn Lazard, A Recipe for Disaster (Still) , 2018

Carolyn Lazard is a New York-based Disabled artist who uses Accessibility in their artwork to challenge norms in art and society. Their work A Recipe for Disaster provides a powerful demonstration of the modes of essential Accessibility which allow. This piece uses the original content of Julia Child French Chef (Artforum, 2020), which has been altered with the additional audio description. An overlay text created by the artist and a voiceover poetically discusses the current segregation in society between non-disabled and disabled individuals. The work's text and voiceover demand an end to the current conditions and a change to current forms of Accessibility. "A WORK MADE FROM THE CONDITIONS OF DEBILITY OR DIFFERENCE, NOT TRANSLATED FOR DEBILITY OR DIFFERENCE" (Lazard, 2018) Highlights the idea that work should be created for all people in the first place having a work that all audiences whether disabled or not can experience on the same terms, the current state for works and all things created are such that works are translated or altered after production for Accessibility. Lazard's work discusses the idea that Accessibility should not be an afterthought; the effectiveness of making demands over requests is powerful as it highlights the idea that there should not be

a question of Accessibility; it should be a necessity. Lazard's work effectively highlights that disability is not just a temporary or optional existence, much like society sees it in its present form. Disability and being disabled is a form of existence, much like any difference humans have between one another; the idea that subtitles and audio descriptions are an option when one watches TV shows or movies signifies the greater ableism that exists in the world of media. The option to turn off subtitles or audio descriptions is simply a switch to turn off the concept and acceptance that disabled individuals exist. All individuals should be treated equally and provided the same opportunities, and the idea that the switch of a button can forget these accessible tools is a statement of belief that disability is an option, a temporary thing, and not a form of constant existence.

Lazard's work is influential in demonstrating and protesting norms, using media that already existed for those who are not disabled, overshadowing Lazard's boldly texted demands. Lazard's work is a demand for equal opportunity and existence; "FOR EVERYONE TO GET LOST . . . TOGETHER" (Lazard, 2018) is a unique yet powerful visualisation of a world where individuals, irrespective of disability or difference, can experience media and art the same way. In the contemporary, art and media reflect societal attitudes and the idea that Accessibility is a post-product option. This essay has already discussed Park McArthur's work where ramps are just the opportunity to exist in the same space (BOMB, 2014), and this idea of post-production accessibility being the standard is the same. Post-production accessibility is just the option for disabled people to exist in the audience when it comes to art and media, but the ability to exist and the ability to exist equally to everyone else are two different things entirely for disabled people. Lazard's work reinforces the idea that for art and media, there are two different audiences; an audience is already a gathering of people, a multiple; the idea that there are two audiences in the same space is paradoxical to logic yet due to the attitudes and treatment of disabled people; the audiences cannot be one of the same if the work is only created for one of them. A world where Accessibility is the consideration for practice is where the two audiences become one. It is only through Accessibility that this segregation can be repaired.

It is easy to say that Accessibility as a consideration and not an afterthought is the way to repair the divide between disabled and non-disabled groups; however, due to societal attitudes and the current system that society operates in today, the world is dictated by legal systems and approaches not only when it comes to art and media but also the institutions themselves. Accessibility to institutions is an unworthy cost, an idea reinforced by Park McArthur where the contemporary world is one where individuals' value is determined by their ability to produce (BOMB, 2014). Because disabled people are not given the same opportunities to give value to institutions and society, Accessibility is, therefore, challenging to promote and implement. It is seen as spending value for individuals who do not produce value and not as an investment to allow disabled individuals to provide value. In Contemporary art, it is often up to the Disabled artist to create the Accessibility themselves, both in its creation and cost; these forms are often abandoned and discarded when the exhibition ends.

## Innovating Accessibility

Despite the current state of accessibility in art institutions and society being inadequate and temporary, innovations in technology and understanding have allowed for newer methods of accessibility to be produced and researched. Accessibility is diverse in its forms. Accessibility in the Arts: A Promise and a Practice by Carolyn Lazard, 2019, is a valuable resource for exploring the different modes of accessibility for institutions to help dismantle ableism (Lazard, 2019). The guide by Lazard emphasizes the importance of moving beyond the standards set by laws and regulations regarding disability to provide a more flexible approach to accessibility that promotes equal existence in art spaces. The document highlights the negative impacts caused by disabled people being excluded from the cultural institutions of art. It discusses how smaller institutions can better meet accessibility standards due to being less regulated and driven by capital. The document discusses how smaller institutions are less plagued with bureaucracy and, therefore, can be closer to the individuals in their host communities. The document also highlights the idea that smaller institutions are defined by each exhibition and artist hosted, allowing accessibility to be a more straightforward adaptation. However, individual exhibitions do not dictate larger art spaces; often, the discussions and needs of artists and audiences are less necessary. Forms of accessibility are widely diverse, whether they provide audio descriptions, closed captions, or sensory spaces. Accessibility does not need to be a project of redefining and transforming; often, simple changes and forms of accessibility are powerful. Accessibility, when provided, is not just to benefit disabled audiences and artists in art institutions; the people to whom they benefit are wide-ranging, and accessibility allows for a diverse audience to be a singular presence and not one of division. Mobility aids, for example, if implemented correctly, provide invaluable support to not only disabled individuals but also young mothers with prams and the elderly. Making spaces less intimidating is valuable in providing support to those with various mental disabilities but also allows other marginalised minority groups to feel more accepted in these spaces, which have not been

historically open to them. Providing transport is also a valuable tool for disabled people. However, it is also essential in allowing all members of society who may not have access to public transport or a car equal opportunity to exist in these spaces.

## Conclusion

As a disabled artist myself, it is key to demonstrate my own reflections, the lessons I have learnt and the overall takeaway I have from the research and discussions using the sources within this essay. The title of this essay, *Beyond Excuses*, is an ode to and a reflection on the state of existence faced by disabled artists, including myself; in my research, I have found that despite all efforts of disabled artists to provide the context in their creations, it is the reality that because the art and the artist are disabled in nature the audience, institutions and academics who are non-disabled may view these processes and works as an excuse for not being able to create in the same way as non-disabled artists instead of as art in its own form and context. Before creating, it will be a consideration of mine to diversify the modes of my practice, as well as consider how the non-disabled audience will react to my work in order to prevent misinterpretation caused by societal beliefs. The title *beyond excuses* is a personal challenge not to disabled artists to stop making excuses but instead is a challenge for non disabled readers, audiences and institutions to challenge their own beliefs and provide accessibility to allow disabled artists and audiences the ability to exist on equal terms whether in modes of art practice or in forms of accessibility for the audiences. In contextualising Disability art in the contemporary, I have learnt that contemporary art, despite being the most inclusive art movement in history, is not free from societal rules and attitudes, despite presenting as a radical challenge to society and being undefinable in comparison to movements of the past, it is still a movement limited to the beliefs society dictates. The methodology of Carolyn Lazard (Lazard, 2018) to antagonise and demand is one which I believe is essential to the progression of my own work as a contemporary artist; instead of allowing my work and practice to be un confrontational and rule-abiding, I must change my approach to make my works both more accessible yet radical and disruptive in messaging in order to demand change and not request it; I must not allow my practice to be passive as change can only come from challenging norms and creating disruption to societal attitudes. I am hopeful change can happen, but only if institutions and audiences are made to listen to and understand the experiences of disabled artists. In my research, I have also learnt the importance of existence for disabled artists and audiences in contemporary art; if permission to exist is not provided by society and institutions, then said existence must be forced and demanded until it is accepted. This essay has discussed and contextualised disability and its existence within contemporary art, exploring both disabled practices in the contemporary and its reception to non-disabled audiences and exploring the reasons for division and segregation disabled individuals and artists face. The essay has further explored the topic of transmutation and its implications in contemporary art. Finally, it has explored the ideas of accessibility and its existence in the contemporary world, as well as solutions to provide a more accessible future.

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