

Garfield Hempinstall  
Barbara Edwards  
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## Who Isn't here: A Brief Essay

It is not some well-kept secret that art galleries are broadly, statistically inaccessible to disabled individuals. It's a foundation of the art market itself; where else would they begin? Art demands urban space, and urban space demands exclusivity. Elevators are expensive and maintenance heavy, ramps take up space, and sensory accommodations call for just enough extra effort that few property managers could be bothered. Unhelped by this plight of inaccessibility is the broad lack of funding for the arts. Exhibitions start small, wherever they can. Growing in the cracks of empty warehouses skirting the city edges, perched in unused office buildings with bland architectural faces, hodge-podged together with duct tape and luck in an unused garage. This is where the inaccessibility begins; sprouted from the uneven cracks of our hostile urban spaces. And, too, the mysticism of the disabled artist, the Outsider. They are not allowed in these spaces from the get go, setting a precedent of invisibility through systemic reduction of accessible spaces.

Outsider art refers to a myriad of things, and the term *outsider* itself doesn't treat any under its umbrella with grace or tact. Also called Folk art or Art Brut (Raw Art, (Smith)), it refers broadly to any artist who was not trained classically in an art institution. This is the typically charitable version of the definition – as [Tate.org](https://www.tate.org) refers to it as “The art of children, psychiatric patients and prisoners who create art outside conventional structures of art training and art production [...]” (Tate). Disabled artists, particularly those with developmental disabilities, are strictly funneled into this label, regardless of if they accept it or not. Historically some were not even aware that their art was being displayed in galleries. “Outsider art – a term coined in 1972 by British art historian Roger Cardinal –was often displayed in the 1970s without the artist's name, who was rarely even invited to openings of exhibitions that featured their work.”(Ahsan).

Where these concepts of the Outsider and the physical space intercept is through visibility. Disabled artists are classified as the *other*, naive folk-art eccentrics whose personal lives must be simultaneously visible enough for gossip but vague enough to endorse an alluring mystique. The language we use to refer to them is dictated by implications of mystic power, as if their talent is better attributed to cosmic forces than the artist themselves. “*Eccentric. Visionary. Prophetic.* It often seems like institutions, galleries, and the media have developed a series of lightly coded terminology with which to tip-toe around issues that can't, or shouldn't, be fully unpacked [...]”(Indrisek). And then the gallery spaces: hermit-crabbing between inaccessible

venues, never creating the space for the disabled to exist. We are led to a purgatory. Disabled art is visible and appreciated by many, and can even fetch high prices in the market, such as Chuck Close, whose work *John* peaked at 4.8 million on the first market (“John by Chuck Close | Auction Results on Artsy”) and Frida Kahlo’s *El sueño (La cama)* which sold for a staggering 54.7 million (“Frida Kahlo - 17 Artworks, Bio & Shows on Artsy”). They pioneer our market trends yet are condescendingly appraised for working in opposition to their personal challenges. Yet the artist behind the work is carefully hidden, dismantled, and discouraged from participating personally. They are proxied by caretakers or dealers, too othered to be presentable in a tasteful cocktail reception, but so preformatively tantalizing that they’re often centered as canonized trend-setters.

This starts with galleries by proxy of access. You would be hard-pressed, in this day and age, to find an artist active in the first market who hasn’t spent a solid 25% of their life idling in galleries. You make connections in galleries. You find like-minded artists, develop collaborations, swap emails, make waves. You begin with small-scale local galleries, dipping your toes – or wheels – into the realm of underfunded works. It gradually snowballs into bigger galleries, fancier venues, and a knowledgeable appreciation for the artists you grew to know in those earlier galleries. None of that happens if you can’t so much as reach the door. Stopped by an impenetrable wall, you watch as the artists slip past you, conveniently ignoring the bulk of your mobility aid to gleefully discuss the depths of their intersectionality with the other artists. You do not get to learn your local artists names, nor attend their meetups. You get to sit before the wall and wonder how long you will have to search before you find a real chance.

This fox-trap of visibility/invisibility is so prevalent that many disabled artists spend their entire careers responding to it. Artists such as Jaklin Romine in her expansive work *ACCESS DENIED*, a running catalog of performance art, added to with every instance that Romine is excluded from an art-world event by stairs (“ACCESS DENIED”). Finnegan Shannon’s critique titled “Do You Want Us Here Or Not” features bold blue benches assembled through a gallery, decorated with phrases like “*This exhibition has asked me to stand for too long. Sit if you agree.*” Adam Cohoon uses a GoPro strapped to his wheelchair to highlight not only the inaccessible spaces prevalent in Toronto’s art show scene, but how looming and impersonal life can appear from the perspective of a wheelchair user (Terrence). From their view, it’s easy to see how we functionably live in the dark ages of disability accommodation – especially so post-Covid. A lack of mask mandates means that, perhaps one of the most invisible groups – the immunocompromised – are barred even from the opportunity to experience an art gallery without terrible risk.

With the physically, mentally, and sensory disabled so cleanly labeled as the Other, its left ample room for guilt-free exhibitions whose main doors are introduced with a flight of steep steps. And beyond the stairs: art hung above where a wheelchair user could reasonably

experience, a distinct lack of braille, and not a single consideration towards audio descriptions for the blind. A sort of *'Well, the stairs mean that the Disabled (regardless of capability to climb said stairs) cannot enter, so we have no need to accommodate anyone for anything'*. Even basic seating for the abled is not accommodated. "I am pretty sure we all have memories of walking through a museum with an aching back or feet. And how many galleries have a place to sit? I can literally think of maybe one in the dozens of galleries I've been to over the years." (Goodpasture). The reality of disability accommodation is that it benefits everyone, not just those that need it. Expanded seating means less pain, dimmer lights decrease headaches, and you – the one reading this – *will* need to rely on an elevator some day, whether you'd like to imagine it or not. Despite all this; High-art has become distinctly interwoven with the exclusionary pain of bloodied heels. Some see it as a necessary evil, while others see it as something of a discomfiting haze into the art market itself. The expectant call of pain and uncomfortable shuffling to show you're a *real* artist, a *real* investor. This self-congratulatory sisyphian obsession with bodily sacrifice loops back into a personal proving: we are not the Other.

When the art market is criticized for being high-brow, exclusionary, and senselessly upper-class, it often comes from one of two places. Those who fundamentally do not understand the field of art trading, and those who are trying to make a case for exterior inclusion into these hard-to-reach groups. While each have their merits and counter points, the case of physical accessibility is often completely drowned out by both. Searching "inaccessible galleries" pulls up articles co-opting the word "inaccessible" to broadly refer to the vague threat of exclusion, rather than the actual, prevalent issue of access to spaces. Inaccessibility can look a myriad of ways – it is just as difficult for an autistic or neurodiverse individual to participate in gallery spaces. Yet the word itself has been extended to apply to able-bodied, mentally well, sensory-stable individuals whose only gripes with the art world are that of high-class socialite fears. This obfuscation of the term only lends itself to the further dismissal of disabled artists. They do not even have a word for themselves, to describe the trials they experience, that is not taken and weaponized against the very field they're trying to participate in. They are invisible. *They* are the Other.

The exclusion of disabled artists from their own spaces is a difficult subject to find someone to blame. There has not been one sole benefactor of ableism, rather a collective system built across a sordid history of exclusion. In an interview, Finnegan Shannon posits "I had done some research and [...] it's often a curatorial choice. Curators have these ableist imaginings of what an exhibition space should look and feel like, and that places to rest are not part of that." (Museums) From their quote, the ableist nature of gallery spaces can be understood as an intentional aesthetic choice. But it's also not hard to buy into the do-it-yourself innocence that local galleries project. Galleries like Hearth ("HEARTH") and The Plumb ("Info — the Plumb"), who began out-of-pocket, taking up any spaces they could work out of, only capable of apologizing for the landlord's lack of interest in supplying accessibility. Both examples given are

underfunded artist-run initiatives that painstakingly center the intersectional artist – except disabled individuals. This is not strictly their fault. They are limited by systemic resource barriers to accommodation, but regardless of who is at fault, a wheelchair user is still incapable of visiting either of their works. Even if their work was a part of it. Would it be ethical to reject a disabled artist's participation in an inaccessible event? How is art – which, at its core, is meant to be enjoyed and seen by all – still achieving its goal if marginal sectors of its audience are completely cut out of the equation? “I think accessibility is important because art, in itself, is created for others to experience. And if that excludes certain groups or people, then it really isn't art anymore.” (Arielle Murphy in Goodpasture)

Harder than pinning blame is finding a solution. The responsibility of accommodation gets tossed around between parties, as nobody is quite willing to execute it themselves. It's not the galleries fault if the landlord doesn't want to add a ramp, but it's not the landlords fault if the ramp is too expensive, and it's not the manufacturers fault for charging the cost of labor and materials. One solution is to divide profits from second-market earnings back into local art galleries, but actually convincing anyone of doing such a thing feels dauntingly improbable. Arguably, funding for art galleries – especially local artist-run spaces – should come from the government, along with large scale funding for disability access i.e ramps and braille inclusions. But *that* is substantially more improbable than asking dealers to divide their money, so the question of blame and solutions turns back on itself; a relative Ouroboros of accessible blame.

Disability rights is, somehow, still a tense subject across every field. But the art market perpetuates this on nearly every systemic level, barring disabled individuals from so much as entering the building. Curators and armchair-psychoanalysis collectors assert that the disabled art at hand works in spite of the artist's disability, when the much more banal reality is that *they* work in opposition to the artist's disability. If every gallery was fully accessible, the rates of disabled artists would surely skyrocket. Not for lack of pre-existing numbers, but for the simple fact that they're being truly represented on the same level as their abled peers. The next time you're in a reception, or attending a busy gallery, survey the room and ask yourself this: “*Who is not here?*”

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