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*Democratizing the Museum: Disability and the Need for Accessibility*

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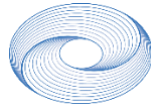
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## Democratizing the Museum: Disability and the Need for Accessibility

Kathy Wang



Unbothered by disruptions of body and mind, the abled being moves and acts freely without consequences. This abled being, within the vernaculars of visual culture, represents a dogmatic portrayal of the ideal human that has been historically seen as desirable and correct. In doing so, these sentiments affirm bias against the disabled being as undesirable. Living with the false assumption that people with disabilities need to be corrected or even eliminated, the discourse of disability is hindered by preconceived notions of what disability is and is not. In doing so, people with disabilities are often ostracized and hidden within the mainstream while they face social, political, economic, and cultural discrimination. However, through the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the emergence and increased influence of the disability rights movement has challenged the dominant cultural representation of disability that underpinned negative attitudes amongst the non-disabled population (Chandler, 58). Even as previous assumptions about disabilities are dispelled, and many are rethinking their attitude toward disabilities, people with disabilities still face challenges within cultural institutions such as the museum. Evidenced by the physical barriers of the exhibition space, programming, and the unwelcoming of artists and audiences with disabilities, museums remain largely inaccessible for many. Marked by their differences, the polarities of disability and ability reveal the systematic ableism that is presented in museum and gallery exhibitions.

By examining the relationship between disability and museum studies, this paper looks at how exhibitions engage with disabilities in relation to ableism and the notions of the ideal citizen. Considering the historical, social, and political discourse of disability, this paper examines how

exhibitions can confront the stigma of disability by analyzing the relationships between visual culture and disability, the universal survey museum, and its exclusion of the other. Through close examination of accessible galleries, such as Tangled Art + Disability Gallery, I argue that the democratization of museums through the inclusion of others creates inclusivity that reflects the new era of museum studies and the current construction of identity politics.

### **Disability? What is it?**

Misconceptions and myths surrounding disability and people with disabilities are set and perpetuated by traditional moral and medical social models to understand disability. During most of recorded history, disability has been primarily perceived as morally objectionable or contrary to natural existence (Mackelprang and Richard, 20). The moral model, based on religious and spiritual beliefs, believes disability is a consequence of sin and immorality while the medical model emerged out of the belief that all human abnormalities are unnatural and should be corrected (103).<sup>1</sup> Both models are rooted under an ableist oppressive value system that associates people with disabilities as the ‘Other.’ Through these dogmatic assertions of disability, people with disabilities were often historically devalued and ostracized in society. However, through the emergence of Critical disabilities studies, the discourse surrounding disabilities became more nuanced in understanding humankind and its difference. Aiming to illuminate disabilities as a social phenomenon, critical disability studies is an interdisciplinary field of inquiries that includes representation from social science, the humanities, and the medical, rehabilitation, and education professions as described by disability scholars Berger and Wilbers (9).

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<sup>1</sup> Seen as the earliest recorded views of disability, the moral model is a part of Western culture and is dominant in many other current world cultures. Growing from the moral model, the medical model is unique to Western culture, with origins in the Enlightenment era in Europe and North America. See Barnes (2012) and Marini (2012) for more information on these models.

Disability is an experience that cannot be reduced to the nature of the physiological impairment, but rather it is a product of societal attitude and the social organization of society. As a product of social definition, the current discourse of disabilities aims to redact previous notions of disability as the other. Like other identity markers, such as gender and race, the study of disability represents the lived and constructed realities of the other while demanding more nuanced, critical attention to itself. It challenges adversities many people with disabilities face within cultural institutions such as museums and galleries and their biased assumptions about disability.

The representation of people with disability in literary, visual, and performative narratives reflects how disabled subjects are often used, then erased in the public sphere. The disabled body and mind have penetrated aesthetic tradition since the emergence of visual culture. Within the traditional notion of art, aesthetics posits the human body and its affective relation to other bodies as foundational to the appearance of the beautiful (Siebers, 5). By doing so, aestheticism highlights corporeality through the differences of the other, which limits definitions of art. However, this is based on a dogmatic and essentialist portrayal of the ideal. Disabilities do not express defect, degeneration, or deviancy in art; instead, they enlarge our vision of human variation and differences that put forward perspectives that test the presupposition that aesthetic traditions rely on (1). Transcending previous aesthetic values, disabilities portrayed in art represent a critical response to reconsider what a human being is. However, that is not the case within earlier artistic traditions and museum culture. By employing connotations of inferiority, people with disabilities and their agency are reduced. They are discounted as entertainment instead of artistic interpretations. While art is an active site designed to explore and expand the spectrum of humanity, visual culture and museum studies have historically imprinted the portrayal of the other and this has continued across the discipline and physical exhibition space.

## **Disability and exhibitions**

Since the emergence of exhibitions, initial museums and galleries created a world of heterogeneity that reflected an ethnographic knowledge of colonial domination and imperialism. Collecting ‘exotic’ artifacts that centralize the Western nation as the ideal society, exhibitions represented the visual markers of mankind’s highest achievements as well as the duality of the ideal and the other.<sup>2</sup>

Characteristically Western, earlier exhibitions were considered universalized as they contained all time, ages, forms, and tastes in one heterotopic space (Fyfe, 36). This continued as museums collected and appropriated exotic objects to weave their portrayal of mankind while the representation of the other was perpetually reassembled and assembled into its story (Duncan and Wallach, 102). However, these considerations are based on a chauvinist observation that conceptualizes racial and cultural progress as a vertical and hierarchal model of power. Furthermore, the exhibitions themselves can affirm, as well as dispel, these ideologies as they represent a part of a method of order and truth essential in the nation (Rydell 141). Evident through earlier portrayals and perceptions of disabilities in exhibitions such as the world fair, these representations of disability become conceptualized and solidified in the present.

World fairs contribute to the development of museums and exhibition culture. Originating with the 1851 London Great Exhibitions of the Works of Industries of all Nations, also known as the Crystal Palace exhibition, world fairs were a cultural phenomenon during the earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century. They served in the construction of the utopian and imperial dream cities of tomorrow; the world fair was aimed at governmental and moral welfare to the masses to turn them into “good citizens of the newly rebuilt national state” (Rydell, 140). Forging the link between world fairs and museums, G.

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<sup>2</sup> Precursor to the museum, the wunderkammer, also known as the cabinets of wonder, is a collection of notable objects emerged during the sixteenth century in Western nations. Acts as a social device to established and upholding members in society, those with affluence and status had the monetary means and influence to purchase and collect foreign artifacts taken from exploring expeditions, trading voyages, foreign trade, and colonialism. See Impey (2001) for more information.

Brown Goode, the assistant secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, was a key contributor to the exhibition's exclusionary history. Devoted to providing the cultural underpinnings for the development of the modern nation-state through museums and world fairs, Goode proved the museum as an invaluable space for the effort of the national government to craft the model citizen. Due to the political culture at the time, the imperialist aim of Western nations craved order and control over their population to win their consent to the existing political order (Rydell 140). Rydell in their essay "World Fairs and Museums" argues that this reinforces dominant idea about civilization and savagery through exhibitions as it "raises issues of agency with respect to fair-goers and attributes to them the capacity to constitute meaning for themselves from selves from the fragments that they see around them" (143). As Goode and others constructed exhibitions that illuminated their belief on the ideal citizen, the fairs were filled with exhibitions that only supported dominant beliefs and values set by the nation-state. In doing so, the 'fragments that they see around them' perpetuate a hierarchical continuum that exists between 'savagery' and 'civilization'.

These polarities were measured in the terms of progress and classified by sciences that rendered Goode's logic as accurate under science (139). However, this is inaccurate as the world fair is a highly mediated and constructed version of reality. In other words, these exhibitions demonstrate the legacy of exhibitions in museum spaces that are conceived under a dogmatic lens of ideal. Directing their white, able-bodied, and middle-class citizen to differentiate themselves from those marked as the other, whether it's by race, sex, class, or health, early exhibitions affirm the inaccurate myth of the ideal citizen. This acts as a form of disciplining bodies and minds to perform for the sake of nationalism, which continues within modern museums and galleries.

As culture is exhibited, shown, displayed, and consumed through the exhibition, the museum evokes the true portrayal of communities, regions, and nation-states (135). Recognized as a key cultural institution, the museum's primary function is ideological as it acts as a means to impress and

educate its audience about society's revered beliefs and values. Inheriting the western structure of knowledge, the objectives of the world fair migrated towards the universal museum. The universal survey museum, as Duncan and Wallach noted in their essay "The Universal Survey Museum," presents a broad range of art history that rationalized the experiences of art (49). Often daunted by neo-classical architecture, this museum embodies and makes visible the idea of state through their adaption of modern society and culture. Placed in a contemporary setting, this museum and its public exhibitions invite the modern population, regardless of class, gender, and ethnicity, to come and think about their commonality. In doing so, the sense of the imagined community can conjure out the complexities, impersonality, and opacity of modern social life (Rydell, 36).

However, disability is often disregarded within the universal survey museum. Due to its political and historical background, the universal museum adheres to an ableist gaze in their perception of society. Through visual installations, and exhibitions, Duncan and Wallach argues this modern museum constructs a power of view designed to foster the illusion of a classless society (52). Despite evoking the façade of an inclusive environment, this design excludes many visitors, particularly for people with disabilities. As a hallmark of the universal museum, the neo-classical architecture becomes inaccessible as the lack of wheelchair-accessible ramps to enclosed tight spaces becomes physical restrictions for those with disabilities (Fig.1).

Placing aesthetic traditions before the needs of the public, these barriers are designed to only heighten the museum experience for the ideal visitor. Like the world fair, the ideal visitor embodies the inaccurate myth of the ideal citizen that earlier exhibitions aimed to evoke. As a result, the universal museum restricts many, particularly people with disabilities, from accessing museums, physically and socially. However, since the emergence of new and progressive social and political movements, discourse surrounding accessibility and inclusion has been effective as more museums are acknowledging systemic barriers that were previous enforced. To shift away from the sense of

alienation for its audience, artist, and workers, modern museums recognize the needs to be accessible. In doing so, the democratized museum acts as a

### **Democratized museum**

The democratized museum can reveal and disrupt the ableist gaze. Stemming from a collection of disability studies, the democratized museum is a new model of the museum that focuses primarily on participation. By acknowledge the importance of accessible participation for all museum visitors, this museum aims to shift the previous collection-centred museum toward being visitor-centred (Runnel and Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, 3). It looks at how power can be shared between the museums, visitors and stakeholders while negotiating professionalism and the role of the museums in modern society (9). This is essential as it disrupts the traditional mode of control built from previous exhibitions seen in the universal museum. Under Goode and his successor's construction of exhibitions, the universal museum support dominant beliefs and values set by the nation-state. This archaic construction was formulated under a racist colonial era that aimed to separate their visitors from those they considered as 'savage.' As a result, the universal museum inherited these notions through its design. However, to align with current social, political, and cultural ideas of inclusivity, the democratized museum aims to change museum development, audience engagement, and the role of technology. As participation is considered a key element of democratic society, the democratic framework identifies the importance of people's inclusion in decision-making process. Evoking this notion, the democratized museum focuses on the visitor's interaction and participation. In doing so, the museum and exhibitions can create an environment that exhibits a culture that is accessible to all audiences, artists, and workers.

Since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the emergence and increased influence of the disability rights movement in North America has changed the way many have perceived disability



(9). Disability activism has been arguing for equality, equity, and highlighting widespread social, political, economic, and cultural reformation of thinking about disability as people with disabilities are gaining increased visibility and recognition within the dominant sphere. By challenging the dominant cultural representation of disability as the other, museums can renegotiate and transform deeply entrenched negative attitudes amongst the non-disabled population (12). While museums are slowly implementing disability art programming, it is not always accompanied by an understanding of disability politics. It is evident to see consideration of disability art programming as a form of tokenism to appeal to the masses if museums and galleries are not considering changing their internal and external structure. Eliza Chandler, former artistic director for Tangled Art + Disability Gallery, notes that museums have been inviting artists with disabilities and disability art programming in “inaccessible venues, failing to pay for disabled artists’ adequate fees, or failing to include accessible programming alongside exhibitions and artist talks” (Chandler 56). Artists and audiences with disabilities experience ableism through many avenues as they are invited to participate in these spaces. As evident by Chandler, participation is not enough for artists and audiences with disabilities if the museum and gallery spaces disregard their needs. As art institutions fail to consider the physical, cultural, and social barriers, they continue to employ ableism and other forms of systematic oppression set by the universal museum. However, the emergence of accessible galleries such as Tangled aims to redefine disabilities within the exhibition as they change the perception of what an accessibility exhibition can look like.

Conceived through the Abilities Art Festival in 2003, Tangled Art + Disability is a nonprofit organization in Toronto dedicated to cultivating disability art through supporting the artistic development of disability. Its mission is based on redefining the world’s experiences of art and those who create it. Supporting Deaf, Mad, and disability-identified artists, Tangled aimed to enhance opportunities for artists with disabilities to contribute to the cultural fabric of society as a form of a

democratized museum. This gallery has helped many artists with disabilities to reach artistic milestones as other museums and galleries do not provide similar opportunities for them. Furthermore, their consideration of accessibility and access allows audiences, artists, and museum workers to be welcomed in art spaces (Fig.2). Walking through their gallery space, Tangled enact the highest possible standards of accessibility for all stakeholders to create a space that welcomes abled bodies as well as people with disability. In curating this space, disability curator Amanda Cachia calls for “infrastructure activism” that “disrupts museum practices for the benefit of the disabled community” (58). For Cachia and many others, an accessible space reacts to and anticipates the presence of Deaf, disabled, Mad, and other non-normative embodied ways of being. This means an accessible museum and gallery space will prepare accommodations such as: American Sign Language interpreters, captioned videos, live open-captioning, amplified hearing device, audio description of all visual material, an audio map of the shared space, wheelchairs, attendant care, way-finders, and other means for their audience, artists, and workers. However, infrastructure activism is not based on logistical concerns, it is creating an open space that is prepared to accommodate to all. Through collaborative efforts with other disability activists and programs, Tangled continues to educate provincial and federal cultural funding bodies about what disabilities art is and how to create culturally responsive funding streams to support the development and showcasing of this arts sector. In doing so, they take part in actively dissembling previous stigmas of disability to re-imagine an inclusive art world.

## **Conclusion**

People with disabilities have the human right to actively participate in society. By changing areas that were previously inaccessible to people with disabilities, current perception of disabilities can be dispelled within the mainstream and the museum can be an advocate for this. Recognized as an

interdisciplinary place for exchange and ideas, the museum can serve as a means for social, cultural, and political change in the way we look at disabilities in art. By including artists, audiences, and workers with disabilities in museums, the visibility and participation of people with disability can dispel the stigma that disability is unnatural and a sign of defect. Due to the historical treatment of disabled folks within visual and exhibition culture such as the world fair, stigmas and biases are still embedded as a form of systematic ableism. The discourse of disability is hidden, as seen from the universal survey museum, even if people with disability are invited to participate in the space. Visibility does not reflect accessibility as it tokenizes people with disability. For when we fail to acknowledge disability and its politics in our desire for disability art, we run the risk of replicating historical ways of appreciating disability arts without recognizing or supporting the professional development, autonomy, and, perhaps most important, the creative and political intentions of disability artists. To create an accessible and open space for all, museums and galleries need to re-evaluate their position as cultural mediators to create an inclusive and accessible space for all.

## Figures

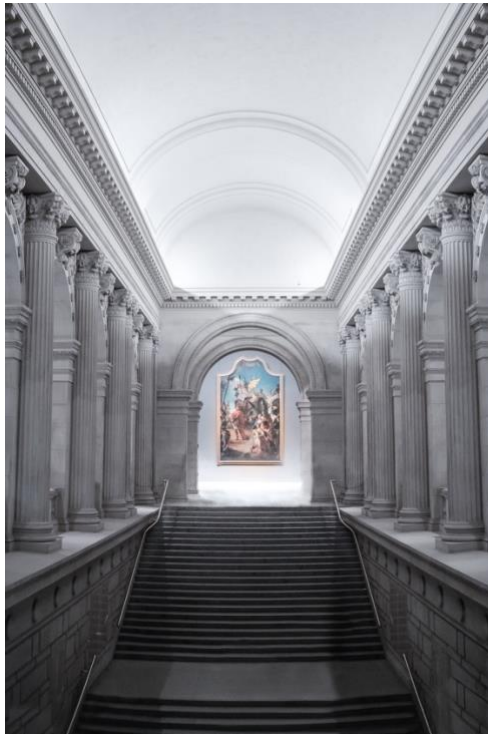


Figure 1: Olsson, Martin. “The Metropolitan Museum of the Art.” *Unsplash*, 2020, <https://unsplash.com/photos/Mfb4TEExET4>

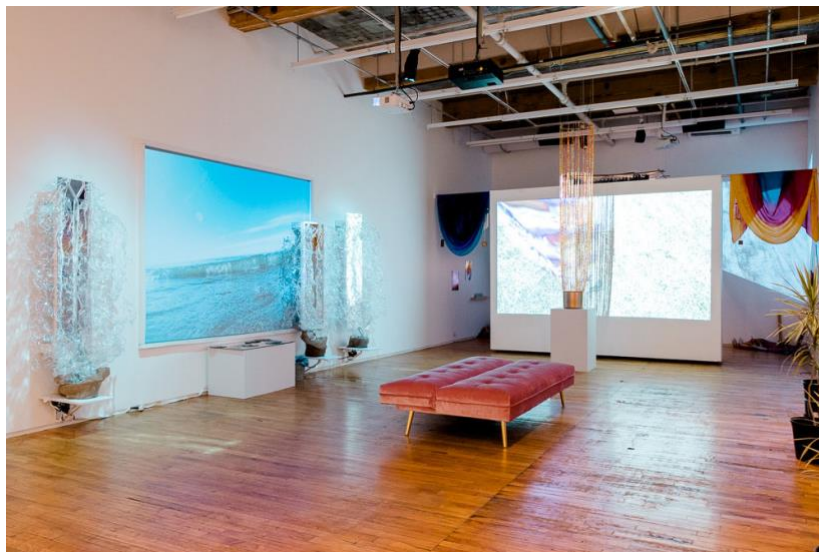


Figure 2: Peek, Michelle. “Sagatay, co-presented with Charles Street Video” 2021, *Tangled Art + Disability Gallery*. <https://tangledarts.org/visit-us/>. Courtesy of Bodies in Translation: Activist Art, Technology & Access to Life.

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