

# ACCESS IN COUNTER- POINT

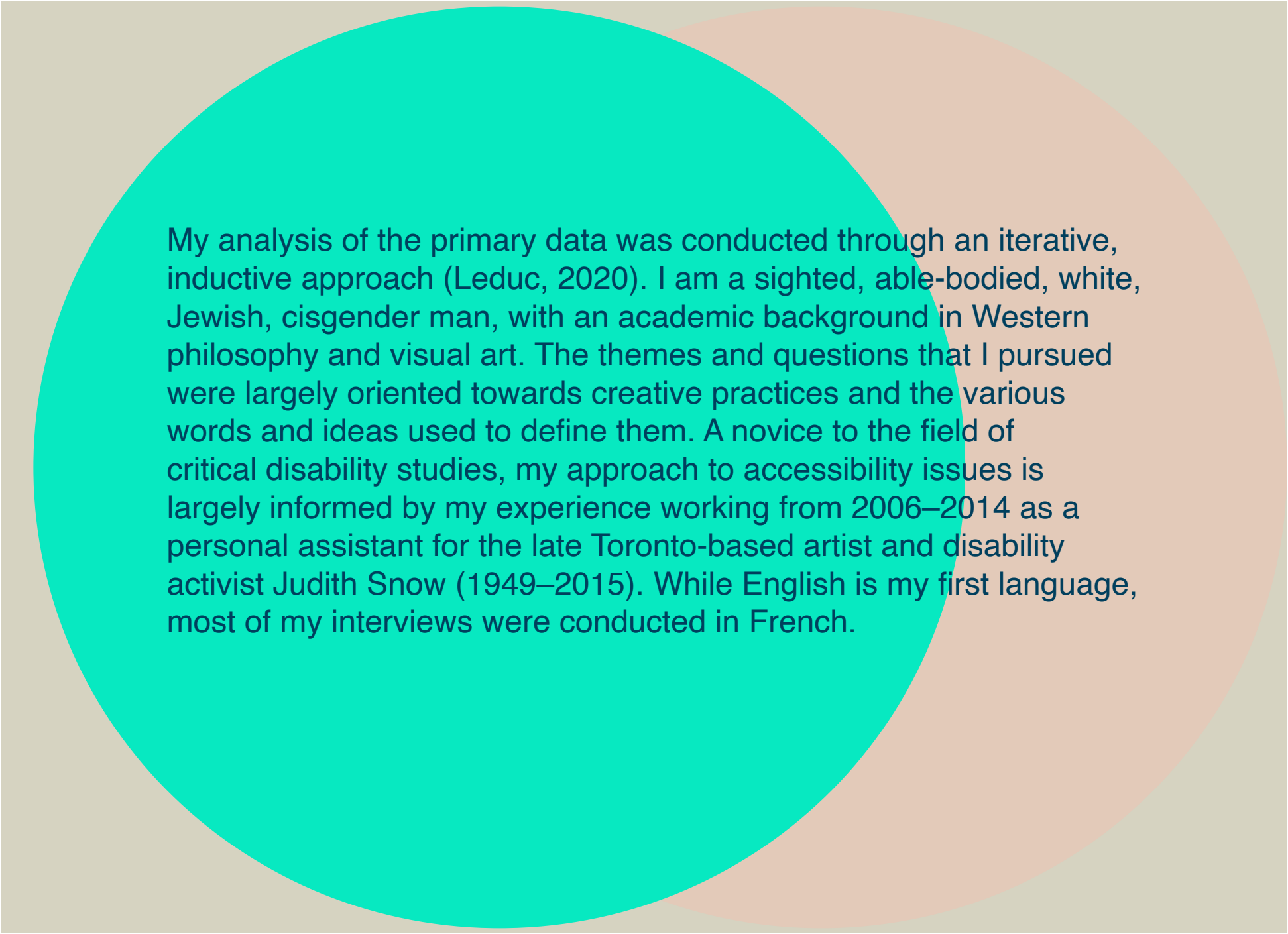
## **Preface**

What follows is the result of research which followed multiple creative initiatives aimed at making dance accessible for people with visual impairment. While considering the creative process and language used by each of these initiatives, I asked:

How does the exploration of dance beyond the visual enable a rethinking of accessibility beyond its strictly logistical dimensions?

## Research Methodology

My research combined auto-ethnographic observation and one-on-one interviews. From October 2021 to June 2022, I attended four audio-described performances and seven working sessions organized by Danse Cité as part of “Décloisonner la multi-sensorialité,” a residency project aimed at making dance accessible for people with visual impairment. I conducted ten interviews with participants of various creative projects, attempting to represent a cross section of artists (4/10), audience members (2/10), audio describers (2/10), and other organizational supports (2/10). I also engaged a cross section of blind (4/10), partially sighted (1/10), and sighted participants (5/10).



My analysis of the primary data was conducted through an iterative, inductive approach (Leduc, 2020). I am a sighted, able-bodied, white, Jewish, cisgender man, with an academic background in Western philosophy and visual art. The themes and questions that I pursued were largely oriented towards creative practices and the various words and ideas used to define them. A novice to the field of critical disability studies, my approach to accessibility issues is largely informed by my experience working from 2006–2014 as a personal assistant for the late Toronto-based artist and disability activist Judith Snow (1949–2015). While English is my first language, most of my interviews were conducted in French.

What does  
accessibility look like  
when it does not  
look like  
**ANYTHING?**

The question emerges from  
a year spent following creative  
projects that explore dance  
**BEYOND** the visual.

The result is not  
a set of policy guidelines.

The result is  
a combination  
of **WORDS.**

## **WORDS** that are also **CONCEPTS**

- every one of them connected to systems of knowledge and power they (often unknowingly) uphold.





Here my aim is not to present  
them as **FIXED** terms.

Here my aim is to share them  
in **MOVEMENT** and **CONTRAST**.

As  
ideas  
in  
**COUNTERPOINT\***

**\*counterpoint/ noun: the art or technique of setting, writing, or playing a melody or melodies in conjunction with another (Oxford, 2022).**

## Words:

1. CREATION / RECEPTION
2. FUNCTIONAL / AESTHETIC
3. NEED / AFFORDANCE
4. CAPACITY / ADEQUACY
5. INTEGRATION / INTIMACY

## A note on format:

In each of the following sections, a brief summary is followed by a set of sample indicators (i.e. things you might look for or value) when perceiving accessibility through each of these terms.

In the “Field Notes” concluding each section, I cite the artists and thinkers who informed my thinking around these issues. Words marked with an asterisk(\*) are defined in the glossary at the end.



1.



CREATION

RECEPTION



CREATION

RECEPTION

## Summary

The desire to make art accessible can take many forms. Is one interested in the experience of a potential audience member? Or in the artistic conditions for creating new work? Does one want to produce a more inclusive public sphere? Or is one interested in new models of collaboration, curation, engagement?

As with all the contrasting terms that follow, it is often difficult to think one concept without implicating the other. Indeed, many inclusive dance projects attempt to expand their public reception precisely by rethinking their approaches on the side of artistic creation.

These subtleties notwithstanding, I consider the basic difference to be helpful for the following reason: it is a reminder that an inclusive arts sector is always embedded in larger socio-economic dynamics. Underpinning the many nuances surrounding accessible approaches to artmaking, spatial design, and communication, accessibility is a question about who makes what for whom, and under what conditions.



# CREATION

## Creation Indicators

Assess whether artists and organizations are pursuing more inclusive workspaces by generating new approaches to creation, collaboration, and the sharing of works:

- How and to what extent do people with visual impairment take part in the creative process?
- How and to what extent are they members of the production staff?
- How and to what extent are they making curatorial decisions about what work is shown and how it is shown?
- How and to what extent do they participate in the production of communication strategies, advertising, etc.?
- What are the organizational strategies in place which make it possible for people with visual impairment to participate in the above capacities (e.g., targeted residency programs, workshop activities, standards for board participation, and hiring)?



## RECEPTION

### Reception Indicators

Assess how artists and organizations understand audience experiences and apply learnings to improve their practices:

- What audiences are attending performances and how regularly do they attend these performances throughout the year?
- How or to what extent are these audiences giving feedback on their experiences?
- How does the attendance (or non-attendance) of people with visual impairment overlap with other social factors such as race, class, gender, sexuality?
- What channels of communication broadcast upcoming shows, creative workshops, employment?



## Field Notes

“Very often I encountered theatres that would have numerous initiatives for making their performances accessible, while completely neglecting how a person in a wheelchair might actually get on the stage.”

-Alan Shain, Disability Artist

“The people we encounter on stage are often reflected in the audience, and vice versa.”

-Naomi Brand, Co-founder of All Bodies Dance (Vancouver, BC)

“Our mandate was not just to offer one or two accessible performances, but rather to grow a public – and to keep them engaged in the work of contemporary dance.”

-Maud Mazo-Rothenbühler, Communications director and Project Manager, Danse-Cité ( Montreal, QC)

“We’re not just planning for accessibility as attendees to an event. We want to be understood as people who work behind the scenes or on the board as decision makers. We want to be involved at all levels of these institutions that have stated commitments to us, but this requires a reframing and an interrogating of accessibility practice as it exists, and this has to be a collective effort.”

-Carmen Papalia, Artist / Organizer



2.



A Venn diagram consisting of two overlapping circles. The left circle is orange and contains the word 'FUNCTIONAL'. The right circle is blue and contains the word 'AESTHETIC'. The two circles overlap in the center, creating a darker, muted color in that area. The background is a light beige color.

**FUNCTIONAL**

**AESTHETIC**



FUNCTIONAL

AESTHETIC

## Summary

Questions about accessibility frequently address the functional dimensions of providing access. Having worked for someone who used a motorized wheelchair, what comes to my mind is the challenge of removing physical barriers within the built environment. However, such logistical considerations acquire new levels of complexity when thinking about artistic programming. The fields of contemporary art and performance rely upon ever-changing audio-visual formats and technologies; increasingly, they are also reliant upon online channels of communication, incorporating the use of smartphones, etc. Similarly, making dance accessible for people with visual impairment now involves an ever-changing set of logistical considerations. For instance, what happens when touch is incorporated into a performance? And how does an audience come to understand and/or feel comfortable with the possibility of moving around a set, or with being interacted with by one of the performers?

(continued on next page)



FUNCTIONAL

AESTHETIC

(summary continued)

Notice how these functional dimensions of accessibility are linked to the basic elements that define a specific work of art. There is a link, in other words, between access and aesthetics. For every creative project, we might then begin by asking: What does it mean to be included in a community that shares in a collective aesthetic (i.e., sensory) experience? The field of dance for people with visual impairment is a particularly experimental domain for asking this question. Through a range of audio-descriptive and multi-sensorial techniques, dance artists are not just thinking about how we bring diversely sighted people into the same physical space; they are thinking about how a diversely sighted audience might share in the creative time-space of a performance. There is a desire to find new ways of sharing both the sensory and conceptual dimensions of artistic experience.



# FUNCTIONAL

## Functional Indicators

Assess how and to what degree artists and organizations are actively pursuing the functional dimensions of providing access:

- How and to what degree is advertising for the event readily available through accessible platforms and formats?
- How and to what degree is the entry to the venue clearly marked and easy to navigate for participants, guides, and accessible transport?
- Where audio-descriptive technologies are available, how and to what degree are staff and resources available for guidance and technical support?
- Where audience participation is invited (e.g., where visitors are invited to touch elements of the piece) how and to what degree are staff and resources available for guidance?



AESTHETIC

## **Aesthetic Indicators**

Assess whether artists and organizations are pursuing access to the sensory and conceptual dimensions of a particular art form:

- How is the audience introduced to the artistic parameters of the given work? Is there a sensory “touch tour,” a pre-event introduction or some other kind of welcoming ritual?
- What is the artistic strategy for making sure the work can be engaged and followed?
- How or to what extent is the work informed by feedback processes, collaborations, and/or consultations that focus on aesthetic questions?

## Field Notes

“Considerations around communication require a lot of thought and innovation. How, for instance, do you promote or publicize a dance piece without including a short video ‘teaser’ as is usually done? How would people from blind and low vision communities know whether it’s a show they would want to experience?”

- Maud Mazo-Rothenbühler, Communications Director and Project Manager, Danse-Cité (Montreal, QC)

“With Audio-description, we began with finding the essence of an action, and then added to this a metaphorical dimension that was in line with the work. The language aimed at translating the overall rhythm and musicality of the piece.”

- Enora Rivière, Dancer / Audio-Describer

“We had a strategy for translating the dance into non-visual forms: layering embodied descriptions, the movement of air, tactile description on the viewer’s skin, and the sounds of the dancers’ own movement and breath. These layers were gradually removed over the course of the performance – inviting the audience to perceive more of the dance with progressively less information to do so. This worked amazingly well!”

- Collin van Uchelen PhD, Conceptual Artist and Community Psychology Consultant

“In a work, there needs to be some “connective tissue” that lets me know I am following a work. With sound for instance, it can be distracting if I have to ask: was that intended by the artist or just something that happened by chance.”

-Denise Beaudry, Artist / Musician

“Our desire was to create an environment where the audience could let the experience happen without it being a puzzle that they were constantly trying to solve.”

- Rianne Švelnis, Facilitator and Artist, All Bodies Dance (Vancouver, BC)

3.



**NEED**

**AFFORDANCE**



NEED

AFFORDANCE

## Summary

Foundational to accessibility issues is the historical meaning of disability and how it has come to assume various dynamics of power and care. Starting in the mid 1970s, a distinction was made by British activists between the physical limitations that constituted an impairment and the resultant social barriers that define a disability as such. With this “social model of disability” (Oliver, 1983) came an awareness of how thinking about disability as a question of “special needs” often reinforced ableist hierarchies of power: i.e., the disabled are defined by a lack, for which they need the patronage of able-bodied medicine and its partners, the arts sector included (Clare, 2017)!

To shift these dynamics, artists, activists, and thinkers have proposed critical models which respect the embodied experiences of people with disabilities. For example, the scholar Arseli Dokumaci uses the concept of “affordance” to describe something that is added as a result of the various innovations and improvisations produced when people are not able to conform with normal modes of behaviour. Similarly, the authors Piet Devos and Georgina Kleege have both attempted to rethink “visual impairment” not as lack but as a “gain.” In so doing, they draw attention to alternative forms of knowledge and sensibility that emerge from diverse somatic experiences.





NEED

## Need Indicators

Assess how artists and organizations address the physical or social barriers limiting the experiences of people living with disabilities.

- How and to what extent are pre-existing works of art adapted to meet the needs of people with visual impairment?
- How and to what extent are community consultations and feedback sessions conducted to better understand the accessibility needs of people with visual impairment?
- What strategies are in place to make sure that changing art forms / performances do not reinforce \*ableist hierarchies?



# AFFORDANCE

## Affordance Indicators

Assess how artists and organizations actively engage diverse forms of embodiment and cognition as sources of critical and creative inquiry.

- How and to what extent do performances acknowledge the somatic experiences of blind and low vision communities as the basis for rethinking traditional art forms?
- How and to what extent are strategies developed to engage community members in rethinking models of creation, curation, and community engagement?
- How and to what extent are works developed that consider \*disability arts as having a distinct cultural value?



## Field Notes

“I began my research by asking: What if we think of disability not as the negation of an affordance but as an affordance in and of itself? With this question in mind, I embarked on my fieldwork, filming the everyday practices of people with various forms of disabilities.”

-Arseli Dokumaci, Artist-Scholar

“I am interested in how we turn accessibility into “acces(sen)sibility,” a practice that might take us:

- from being unconsciously immersed in the naturalized violences of separability;
- to consciously making space for different unintelligible sensibilities (relating beyond the need to understand and codify);
- to (much later) being able to experience other viable ways of being that are not grounded in separation, unconsciously.”

- Elwood Jimmy, Author and Educator

“Whether through the auditory exploration of space and presence or the haptic appropriation of another’s movement into one’s own body, blindness brings along an intensely affective, sensory plenitude to the dance theatre, which is at odds with the formalism and distanced judgment typical of the more conventional, predominantly visual approach to dance. The result of such promising experiments within contemporary dance is the emergence of a more inclusive aesthetics in which the creative potential of sensory differences is no longer suppressed, but ultimately acknowledged.”

- Piet Devos, Literary Critic

4.



**CAPACITY**

**ADEQUACY**



CAPACITY

ADEQUACY

## Summary

Notions of “capacity building” are often used when thinking about accessibility at the scale of civic society. If one wants to describe how a particular community increases its available resources for people with visual impairment, capacity neatly encompasses “what people have and can do” (Animating Democracy, 2017) in ways that can include both the creative and logistical dimensions of arts programming.

At the same time, a postcolonial critique suggests that the notion of “capacity” might too often assume growth as an unquestionable aim to be pursued. Again, capacity often means “capacity building” – an enterprise that Indigenous thinker Elwood Jimmy describes as an unconscious habit of settler-colonial expansionism. Alternatively, Jimmy proposes that we might think less about capacity (in this use) and more about adequacy, asking instead: what set of conditions are adequate to the needs defined by each particular community at any given moment (Jimmy, 2019).



## CAPACITY

### Capacity Indicators

Assess what resources are available for making artworks accessible to blind and low vision communities:

- How and to what extent are staff trained and technical resources acquired to support audio-described performances?
- How and to what extent are funds allocated for the uses of disability arts and/or accessible performances?
- What strategies are used to create formal links between multiple arts organizations on matters of accessibility (i.e., sharing of resources, publicity, etc.)
- How and to what extent are there skill development and training programs available for people with visual impairment?



## ADEQUACY

### **Adequacy Indicators**

Assess how resources for making accessible artworks are acquired and sustained through continuous dialogue with blind and low vision communities.

- How and to what degree is there communication between arts organizations, people with visual impairment, and the community organizations that support them?
- How and to what degree are skill development and training programs developed in response to the stated desires of people with visual impairments and the community organizations that support them?
- What strategies are in place to ensure that accessibility protocols are continuously adapted in dialogue with people with visual impairment?



## Field Notes

“The capacity family of outcomes encompasses the abilities and facility of an individual, institution, and/or community to effectively engage in making social or civic change. These capacities are often considered intermediate because they are typically prerequisite to more concrete impacts.”

- Continuum of Impact, Animating Democracy 2017

“Human purpose can be imagined as building monuments and walls that will last and leave a traceable legacy that attests to the worth and virtue of the individuals involved in contributing towards the imagined idea of progress. Conversely, thread sensibilities are oriented towards relationality. They require that we sense entanglement in order to weave genuine relationships, which will in turn command responsibility for collective wellbeing as a grounding force for adequate (new) political and institutional systems (i.e., adequate relationships will build adequate capacities to work together that will secure adequate processes).”

- Elwood Jimmy, Author and Educator

“Elwood Jimmy uses the idea of “Access-Sense-ability” to describe a more flexible practice of accessibility that can evolve over time, something more in line with a living agreement than a static checklist approach to accessibility, and I think that’s what open access is getting at too.”

-Carmen Papalia, Artist/Organizer



5.



**INTEGRATION**

**INTIMACY**

## Summary



INTEGRATION

INTIMACY

Central to accessibility pursuits is the desire to create more inclusive communities. And yet, with every generation, these ambitions need to be reframed. For instance, in the 1980s the notion of “integrated dance” emerged in England and the United States, promoting new artistic encounters between bodies with and without disabilities. For people such as France Geoffroy, founder of Montreal-based Corpuscule Dance, integrated dance offered a model of inclusivity that pushed beyond the notion of “adapted dance.” The idea was not simply to accommodate needs but rather to find “new aesthetic possibilities in the movement of the atypical body” (translation mine).

In recent decades, the conceptualization of integrated dance has been further renewed, with many in the disability justice movements now questioning the implications of “integration” as a viable model of inclusivity. Integration, some suggest, is a word which assumes the subordination of marginal differences into a normative center. This critique is \*intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989), pointing to the ways in which people with disabilities are often affected by overlapping systems of oppression based on race, gender, and sexuality. From this awareness come new forms of solidarity – with ideals around inclusivity now paying greater attention to the distinct cultural identities formed because of marginalization and oppression. (Continued on next page.)



INTEGRATION

INTIMACY

**(Summary continued)**

From the disability justice movement, the notion of intimacy has emerged in counterpoint to integration. Specifically, Mia Mingus' notion of "access intimacy" provides a model of inclusivity that does not paper over the often difficult or awkward processes of being in the company of difference. Access intimacy cannot be reduced to a set of policy guidelines that can be neatly checked. It is a radically contextual and relational model that pays attention to the embodied feeling of all participants involved and to the fragilities of interpersonal trust.

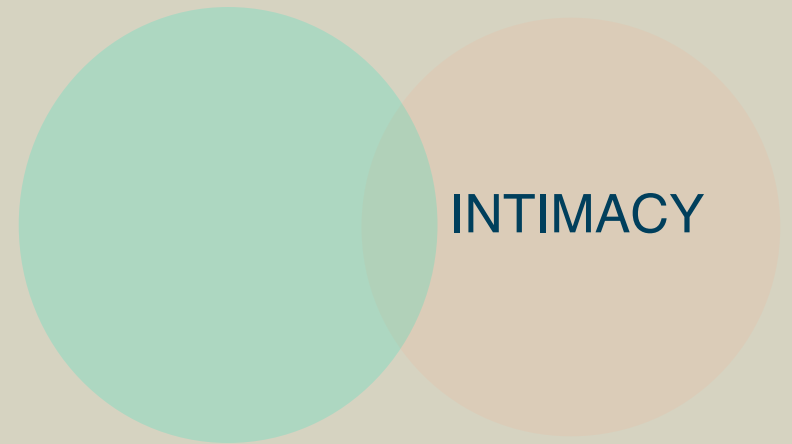


# INTEGRATION

## Integration Indicators

Assess how and to what degree people with visual impairment are enabled to participate in cultural events.

- How and to what degree are artists with visual impairment integrated into works developed by sighted artists?
- How and to what extent are audience members with visual impairment able to attend mainstream cultural events?
- What strategies are developed to introduce audiences with visual impairment to mainstream cultural canons?



## Intimacy Indicators

Measure the degree to which art enables a diversely sighted community to feel at ease with its own differences.

- The presence of blind and low vision audiences produce encounters with able-bodied audiences.
- Development of creative programming which accepts visual impairment as having its own histories and cultures.
- Development of programming in which diversely sighted artists find new working methods in relationship to one another.

## Field Notes

“With our company the basis of integration was to say: the people on stage should reflect the people in the world.”  
- Georges-Nicolas Tremblay, Dance artist and Co-Director of Corpuscule Danse”

“Adapting my practice to account for ocularcentrism is an ongoing process of constant listening, accountability, self-criticism and flexibility, but also of accepting the slowness of this process and my own limits as a sighted and able-bodied person.”

-Emile Pineault, Dancer / Choreographer

“Access intimacy is that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else ‘gets’ your access needs. The kind of eerie comfort that your disabled self feels with someone on a purely access level. Sometimes it can happen with complete strangers, disabled or not, or sometimes it can be built over years. It could also be the way your body relaxes and opens up with someone when all your access needs are being met. It is not dependent on someone having a political understanding of disability, ableism, or access. Some of the people I have experienced the deepest access intimacy with (especially able bodied people) have had no education or exposure to a political understanding of disability.”

- Mia Mingus, Access Intimacy: The Missing Link, 2011

“A supporter of the project who helped me in its development told me: ‘What I find interesting about your project, and valuable, and why I am going to help you is because you want to create an experience not just for the community of people who are blind, and not just for sighted audience members but you want to encourage the encounter of different audiences’ – and it’s helped us a lot on the production and artistic sides of this project that people saw that encounter as being valuable.”

- Audrey Anne Bouchard, Artist

“Integration has become the whole premise of accessibility as it is currently understood . . . Institutions often require disabled communities to assimilate into a wider non disabled culture. . . but a lot of what’s come about within the Disability Justice movement is about preserving culture and history and our various ways of being. Access art is, I think, really about preserving disability culture.”

- Carmen Papalia, Artist/Organizer

## Glossary

**Ableism:** Like other systems of oppression such as sexism, racism and so on, ableism refers to the oppression of disabled people. Ableism “sees persons with disabilities as being less worthy of respect and consideration, less able to contribute and participate, or of less inherent value than others. Ableism may be conscious or unconscious, and may be embedded in institutions, systems or the broader culture of a society. It can limit the opportunities of persons with disabilities and reduce their inclusion in the life of their communities.”(1)

**Decolonization:** Decolonization involves the restoration of Indigenous worldviews, cultural traditions, and perspectives by shifting the way Indigenous Peoples view themselves and the way non-Indigenous people view Indigenous Peoples. This shift includes unlearning colonial ways of being, and eschewing from the colonial status quo, by opening up to Indigenous knowledge and practices. Indigenous communities are in the process of reclaiming the family, community, culture, language, history, and traditions that were taken from them under federal government policies. (2)

**Disability:** A mental or physical condition that restricts an individual’s ability to engage in one or more major life activities (e.g., seeing, hearing, speaking, walking, communicating, sensing, breathing, performing manual tasks, learning, working, or caring for oneself). (3)

**Disability Justice:** Disability justice is a form of activism led by and for disabled Black, Indigenous and People of Colour. This form of activism focuses on experiences of disability and ableism from an intersectional perspective, which takes race, gender, sexuality, and class into account. (4)

**Deaf and Disability Arts:** Arts Deaf and disability arts are diverse artistic practices in which being Deaf, having a disability or living with mental illness is central to the exploration of narrative, form and/or aesthetics. This work carries a high degree of innovation and breaks with traditional or dominant artistic conventions to bring distinct perspectives and ways of being into the arts ecology, shifting perceptions and understandings of human diversity.(5)

## (Glossary Continued)

**Inclusion:** An environment and commitment to respect, represent and accept diverse social groups and identities; an environment where all people feel like they belong. (In K-12 learning environments, inclusion can sometimes also refer to the practice of integrating students with disabilities into the classroom setting.) (6)

**Intersectionality:** A word created by a scholar named Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe overlapping systems of oppression. It means that not everyone experiences disability or marginalization the same way. For example, some of us experience disability in a way that is impacted by our experience of race, gender, and sexuality.(7)

**Social Model of Disability:** Unlike the medical model that considers disability as an impairment, the social model views it as caused by social obstacles. This model originated in the independent-living advocacy work of British activists belonging to the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation. In 1975, these activists were the first to reinterpret the concept of disability in Fundamental Principles of Disability, 24 a manifesto that differentiated between physical limitation (impairment) and being disabled by society (disability). This nuance was theorized in 1981 by British sociology professor Mike Oliver, who postulated the “social model of disability” to signify these oppressive social dynamics and thus pave the way for Critical Disability Studies.(8)

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**danse—cité**



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