



Thierry De Greef, Forêt de fleurs, 2025

Research Memo from Postmarginal's *La Machine des sens* Residency
Eastern Bloc – October 30 - November 7, 2025

Aaron Richmond

CONTEXT:

What follows is a research memo produced during a creative residency organized by *Postmarginal*. It presents my efforts to reactivate a 2021 access framework I developed as part of Mass Culture's inaugural *Research in Residence Program*.

Entitled "Access in Counterpoint," the 2021 framework aimed to provide a set of conceptual footholds for conversations around accessibility. Far from a set of fixed protocols, my hope was to provoke reflection around some of the core tensions I encountered while working with artists and arts organizations trying to make themselves more accessible.

The framework was organized around five core tensions:

1. Creation - Reception
2. Functional - Aesthetic
3. Need - Affordance
4. Capacity - Adequacy
5. Integration - Intimacy

For each set of terms, I linked concrete case studies with more abstract reflections from artists and scholars in the field. My hope was to inform future exchanges between ideas and practices in the arts sector at large.

La Machine des sens

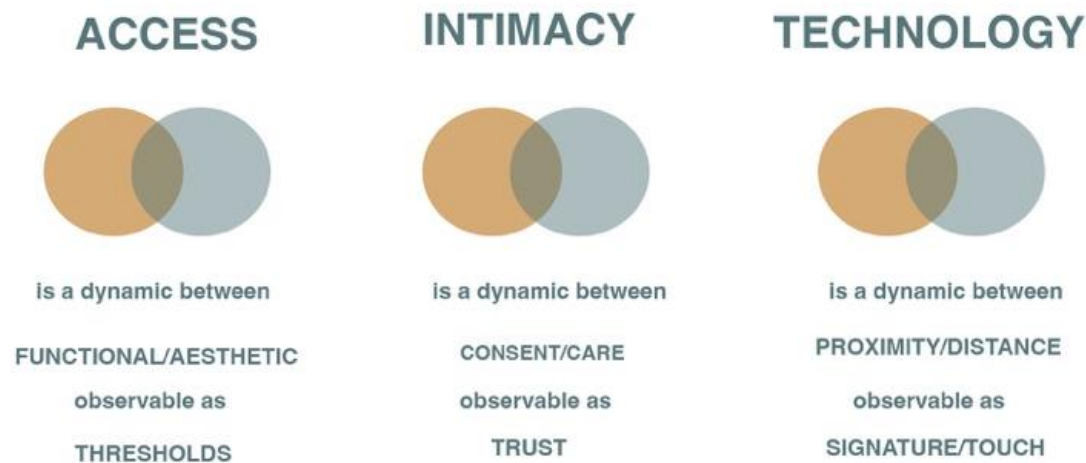
October 30–November 7, 2025

Postmarginal's *La Machine des sens* residency brought together four multidisciplinary artists whose practices are rooted in different forms of embodiment: Gaëtane Cummings, Cai Glover, Art Babayants, and Thierry De Greef. Through immersive installations incorporating sound, movement, video, and tactile environments, each artist developed a work for audiences to encounter in November 2025 at Eastern Bloc. This iteration was intended as a workshop for a site specific, ambulatory and immersive performance to be held in November 2026 at Bâtiment 7, a renovated train factory in the Pointe-Saint-Charles neighbourhood of Montreal.

In addition to these four artists, the core team at Postmarginal - consisting of Creative Director Peter Farbridge, Producer Crystal Chan, and Special Consultant Anne-Laure Matthieu - also invited a select group of technology specialists and academic researchers to support and inform the creative residency. The following document refers to these participants, and particularly Naila Kuhlmann, who collaborated on many of the questions posed in the following document.

Note on Organization:

The following document is divided into three sections. In each section, I describe a set of dynamics that emerged during the residency, and draw some linkages with Access in Counterpoint (2021). The graphic below offers a summary of each section.



ACCESS

is a dynamic between

FUNCTIONAL/AESTHETIC

observable as

THRESHOLDS

Summary:

What are the factors that enable or limit the scope of our participation in works of art?

Conversations around access often default to thinking about these factors as a set of functional or *logistical* concerns: for example, how to remove barriers to the space of an exhibition? Or how to alert a person with a disability of an upcoming performance? In *Access in Counterpoint* (2021), I tried to show how contemporary artists and thinkers were deepening these conversations to encompass the more deeply *aesthetic* question: What does it mean to be included in a community that shares in a collective aesthetic (i.e. sensory) experience?

Thinking access through this counterpoint of functional and aesthetic concerns has two important implications:

- 1.) It acts as a check against the habit of thinking about access as an after-thought i.e., as a set of logistical questions that are solved once the (presumably able-bodied) work has been created. The challenge is to see access questions at work through the entire creative process.
- 2.) We can begin to think about access without assuming a patronizing relationship between able-bodied producer and a disable-bodied public. As both John L. Clark and Piet Devos suggest, access is a street that moves in all directions; with the disability arts having no

less capacity to offer new forms of aesthetic experience and cultural participation.

These questions were particularly relevant to *La Machine des sens* residency, whose mandate was both (a) to think questions of access throughout the creative process and (b) and engage the aesthetic worlds produced by voices otherwise marginalized in the cultural field.

NEW for me in the *machine-des sens* residence was the realization that these questions of access - might be best observed as **THRESHOLDS**.

As Anne-Laure Mathieu put it at the final presentation: “How do we enter the space of another?”

A few examples of where this became apparent:

1. **Photoflash:** A work that dramatizes/thematizes our entry into the space of the work. In this experiment, a bright spotlight covers a piece of paper hanging on the wall. When a visitor approaches the wall, a sensor cuts the spotlight abruptly, revealing the afterglow of a fluorescent glow-in-the-dark graphic that has been painting on the paper.

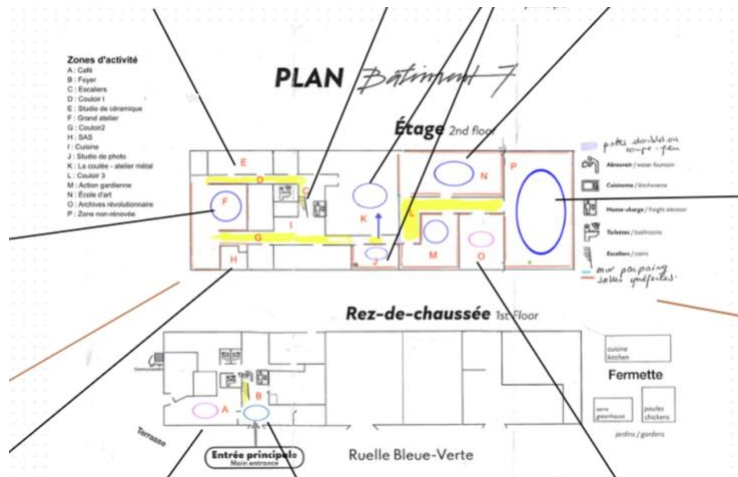


Photoflash, SIT + Adriana

2. **Site:** Questions around *Batiment 7* and Eastern Bloc: A conversation with Gaëtane about the corridors and elevator. A logistical barrier becomes a prompt for institutional engagement. A reminder that the functional is nothing to be scoffed at. Naila to

Gaëtane: “there are concrete and functional barriers to participation that must first be removed before we can talk about the creativity that each individual brings to participating in their own way.”

Similarly, participants mentioned that the location of *Eastern Bloc* during an STM strike became an access barrier more broadly?



Forêt de fleurs, Malte, Léa, Victoria.

3. **Forêt de fleurs.** In this work with Thierry de Greef, folded paper flowers included process notes. Some asked: How does an artwork's presentation manifest one's working process? There is a question particular to access: How and when to convey the work of producing access.

Intimacy is a dynamic between **CARE and CONSENT** observable as **TRUST**

Summary:

In *Access in Counterpoint* (2021), I tried to show how conversations about disability justice had shifted away from “integration” as a model of cultural participation. For many, the term assumed a patronizing dynamic whereby the endgame of access work was to bring those with disabilities into the mainstream of contemporary art: i.e. to normalize their difference. Through people like Mia Mingus, the idea of access intimacy proposed an alternative horizon: that the spaces of contemporary art become spaces of intimacy capable of holding difference.

In the *Machine des sens* residence, I became conscious of a more subtle dynamic at play within the creation of intimacy amongst a team of collaborators. I began to question the role of transparency and consent within the formation of creative projects – and wondered about its limitations, in establishing trust between artist and collaborators of mixed abilities.

Consent: On the one hand, I see how intimacy and trust requires a certain degree of transparency. For example, as a freelancer, I am particularly sensitive to how I am engaged in the project: What context am I given? What information is made clear around my participation? Deliverables? Intellectual Property? Wages? Reliability of Finances? While over-determining our participation may be counter-productive, I found myself wanting to know more about the scope of what is known and not-known. For someone with a disability, whose needs around transport and communication often add further logistical and financial stresses to participation, it seems fair to assume a large degree of transparency as a

precondition to feeling safe and comfortable moving forward in a creative collaboration.

Care: This word is a temporary placeholder for something other than consent. A form of consideration and intimacy that is not neatly accounted through acts of “transparency” with another. A few times, I became mindful of the risk of deciding for people with disabilities what constitutes a safe/accessible space. There is a risk that you end up patronizing a person with a disability by overprotecting them from unknowns. In other words, that you take away the agency to decide and navigate these unknowns.



Final Sharing Event, Eastern Bloc

- **Example 1:** I recently tried to give John Lee Clark a tour of my studio at Concordia. He responded, “just let me figure it out.” I was being patronizing – and likely because I was uncomfortable with his access needs. Were I more attuned to his agency, I would have seen that he was well habituated to exploring spaces on his own.

- **Example 2:** A choreographer I know is entering a project with blind dancers. Do we ensure she knows what she is doing? Do we demand that she undergo “sensitivity training”? But then, the risk is that people foresee too much risk and this limits their willingness to take this leap.
- **Example 3:** Roundtable exchange between Naila and Gaëtane around how to give people agency to decide for themselves around a particular situation. NAILA: “I wanted to emphasize that we should not assume how a person can or wants to participate or not, especially if we do not share their lived experience; in this specific case, that a deaf person has many other ways to participate in dance without relying on music (I was thinking of Cai). This was definitely not to say “it’s up to them to figure it out”; on the contrary, we need to think about how to bring the experience to life in every sense and through multiple possible modes of participation, while respecting the autonomy of the participant and recognizing that this is an encounter between their lived experience and what we are trying to create together. “
- **Example 4:** Art Babayant’s project, Queer Tango - Men dancing with men. There was a question of forced discomfort: precisely not giving people the space to decide whether to consent to an experience. As Anne-Laure Mathieu described, there is a dynamic between comfort and discomfort that is central to the creative process.



Le Portail de tissu, Peter Farbridge, Andrée-Anne

TECHNOLOGY is a dynamic between **PROXIMITY** and **DISTANCE** observable as **SIGNATURE/TOUCH**

Summary:

How does technology mediate our creative practices? And how do we think, both critically and creatively, about what it does to the spaces of collaboration? How does technology dictate (and risk generalizing) creative direction? For me, these are new research questions that seem particularly relevant within the *Machine des Sens* residency.

Case Study: Cai Glover and Motion Capture:

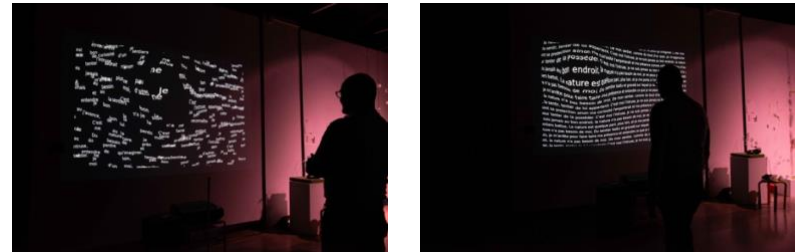
In his initial presentation, I saw in Cai's choreography a unique combination of bodily articulation at two scales: one large, lyrical, sweeping gestures, and one precise, micrological, related to the manual dexterity of signing.

When working with JF, the motion capture filter that is easiest to program works with the first, larger scale. With limited time, Cai's practice can only explore this dimension. To explore the smaller scale requires more time to queue the computer inputs to precise hand movements. The work with Cai, if it only lasts so long, will effectively force Cai to mute or underexplore this aspect of his signature choreographic voice. There is a risk that his "subjective touch" is overridden by the more generic "filter" effects of a new technology.



Cai Glover and Jean François Boisvenue

Other opportunities to think about the use of "filters" more generally in our uses of technology: When does a filter have a generalizing effect? i.e. a distancing of our physical presence.



La poésie du corps, Jean François, Malte

How does technology dictate the dynamics of collaboration?

The "tech" role becomes problematic from point of view of collaboration: specialization of knowledge means ownership of one role. Fixity can be problematic. Cai needs JF to develop. Similarly, JF's energy and attention becomes less

dramaturgical/creative and more machinic. They can't switch. Can this be avoided when the technological interface requires a highly specialized knowledge? Is one possible goal to factor in a co-teaching element so that, for example, Cai could learn to manipulate and experiment with the filters on his own?

At what point is the technology de-humanizing to Cai and to JF, either by generalizing their particular expression or by limiting their participation to a function?

Relevant Scholarship:

Jo Freeman: “On the Tyranny of Structurelessness”

John Lee Clark: “On Distancism,” in *Touch the Future*,

Suely Rolnick: “On practices of “subjectification.” in *The Experimental Exercise of Freedom*.

Sarah S. Jain,” The Prosthetic Imagination: Enabling and Disabling the Prosthesis Trope.”



Cai and JF