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Amanda Cachia. (2024). *Smoke and Mirrors* [Exhibition]. Zimmerli Art Museum, New Brunswick, NJ, United States.

<https://zimmerli.rutgers.edu/art/exhibition/smoke-mirrors>.

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Smoke and Mirrors, a recent exhibit at the Zimmerli Art Museum on Rutgers University's New Brunswick campus, focuses on the concept of access aesthetics. Curated by Dr. Amanda Cachia, a scholar, curator, and disability arts activist, the exhibit includes films, drawings, sculptures, prints, textiles, and multimedia installations by Emanuel Almborg, Alt Text as Poetry, Erik Benjamins, Pelenakeke Brown, Fayen d'Evie, JJJJerome Ellis, Vanessa Dion Fletcher, Sugandha Gupta, Carmen Papalia, Finnegan Shannon, Liza Sylvestre, Aislinn Thomas, Corban Walker, and Syrus Marcus Ware.

Cachia explains that the title of the exhibit refers to an illusion: smoke, or the social construct of the museum, covers up the truth of its inaccessibility, but a mirror, exemplified by the pieces in the exhibit, reflects it. She describes, "Being in a museum is not as easy as we think. The idea of the museum as a perfect place is a façade unless we think in someone else's shoes" (Dube, 2024). Access aesthetics help spark this kind of reflective thinking from nondisabled people without engaging in the often-used and often-criticized mode of simply mimicking the disabled experience, while also creating an engaging, accessible, and enjoyable experience for the disabled visitor.

Cachia describes access aesthetics in her book *The Agency of Access: Contemporary Disability Art and Institutional Critique* (2024) as a powerful, political, and

intersectional framework that centers access as both the subject matter and guiding principle of exhibits, aiming to engage multiple senses and challenge power structures through art (p. 8-9). The theme is strong across the exhibit, and visiting becomes an intensely embodied experience. Certain pieces are accompanied by traditional access tools that both make the pieces more accessible for disabled visitors and invite nondisabled visitors to experience art forms in new ways. For example, Gupta's "Sensory Textiles," created through adaptive fiber arts processes, are accompanied by swatches of the knit, crocheted, embroidered, and felted materials, and that Papalia brothers' film "Impaired: Volume 1 & 2" has captions and detailed audio descriptions.

Others invite the audience in through nontraditional means. Visitors are invited to take off their shoes and walk across Benjamin's "Reflexology Doormat" series, which mimic the reflexology walking paths found in many urban Asian public parks, or sit in Shannon's "I want to believe," a chair that intensely massages the entire body accompanied by a poem comprised of the chair's ad copy, which promises pain relief. The collaborative installation "Alt Text as Poetry Lounge" is the most ambitious of these, providing a comfortable seating space with tactile and visual art, spoken and musical audio, workbooks, and candy that explore the possibilities of alt text and opportunities to engage all five senses in experiencing an art piece. These challenge the "look but don't touch" norm of the art museum and encourage the visitor to consider how their bodies impact their experience in an innovative way.

Familiarity with Cachia's text or other literature on access aesthetics makes this thread through the exhibit much more clear than the exhibit's wall text, which defines

access aesthetics as the ways that “artists make transparent the inequities in museums” for able-bodied visitors who may not have considered the barriers faced by disabled visitors. This summary does not do this complex topic justice and focuses more on the experience for the able-bodied visitor than the intentions of the disabled artists or the way that a commitment to access aesthetics influences the museum experience for disabled visitors. These complexities of access aesthetics are invoked in the art and some of the supplementary material accessible through QR codes placed throughout the exhibit, but would likely be lost on a visitor new to the concept due to the limits of the wall text.

Another driving force behind the exhibit is fugitivity, described by the wall text as a term from Black and Indigenous studies to analyze “strategies of survival and resistance that defy easy identification or categorization” (“Smoke and Mirrors”). “Activist Wallpaper,” on display in the entryway and first room of the exhibit, set the tone for this theme throughout the exhibit, portraying Black trans activists in large, futuristic portraits. Ware created these portraits to assert the importance of these activists by drawing them “in a style and medium previously reserved for dignitaries and wealthy patrons” and cement their place in the past, present, and future, describing the pieces as “a way of inserting my community into art history and as a way to document my reality” and of “trying to keep alive” these figures (Ware, 2021). Ellis’s film, “Impediment is Information,” also connects the past and present, reimagining a 1900s newspaper advertisement about an escaped enslaved person “with an impediment in his speech” as a poem, reading the archive against the grain to illuminate Black disabled resistance. This reinterpretation of archival material resonates with methods practiced by historians like Saidiya Hartman and

Kim Nielsen, which seek to fill in gaps in the historical record of Black and disabled experience, especially resistance (Hartman, 2020; Nielsen, 2020). “Finding Language,” a recording of an interactive, intersectional performance art piece by Fletcher at a 2019 disability arts symposium in Toronto, also engages with fugitivity in relation to language. Fletcher uses “word scavenger hunt” notecards filled out by symposium participants to translate English words from the performance space into her indigenous languages, Potawatomi and Lenape, to demonstrate resistance to the colonialism and ableism of the English language and its dominance in Canada. In addition to viewing the recording of the live performance, visitors can see examples of the cards filled out at the event; the prompts are broad (“a word that makes you feel good,” “a word that makes you remember”) and encourage the audience to reflect on the presence of language in the exhibit space.

Crip time is also highly present in the exhibit. “Have you ever fallen in love with a clock,” a clock created by Shannon that tracks the day of the week rather than hours, minutes, or seconds, is on display alongside a series of drawings of its installation in public spaces called “Public Time,” drawing out the tension between the slowness of crip time and the pace of public life. Brown’s digital prints, “Crossings: Taemā and Tilafaigā,” explores patterns of movement and migration as a site for crip time, as the crossing of borders and oceans opens up space for *vā*, “the space in-between,” and *malu*, “sheltering and protection,” outside of ableist and capitalist structures and systems. The wall text for Brown’s piece uses Alison Kafer’s often-repeated description of crip time: “rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet

disabled bodies and minds” (2013, p. 27). However, the exhibit also does not shy away from what Ellen Samuels calls “the less appealing aspects of crip time” (Samuels, 2017). For example, Thomas’s “A title is a dream is a portal is a possibility is a world we are daring to conjure,” a hand-lettered piece on a wall that describes an artwork that “was not able to be realized in this space at this time,” pointing, on one hand, to possibility, and on the other, to absence and vulnerability.

This exhibit provides an engaging glimpse into the current state of disability art and activism, bringing the works of a diverse group of prominent disabled artists together to show the excellence, innovation, and motivation of the access aesthetics movement. It also throws the inaccessibility of the rest of the museum into sharp relief, as exiting *Smoke and Mirrors* places the disabled visitor back into a space full of barriers without a curatorial eye toward accessibility or disability. While its time on display at the Zimmerli has ended, seeking out any of these pieces or Cachia’s other exhibits would be of great benefit to anyone with an interest in disability studies, as they are as interdisciplinary as the field itself, bridging activism, accessibility, intersectionality, history, language, and more across a range of art forms.

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