

Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 68: Accessibility

Guest: Shannon Finnegan

Host: Alice Wong

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For more information: DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/podcast

Introduction

[hip-hop beat with radio static]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the *Disability Visibility Podcast* with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Howdy, y'all! Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host, Alice Wong. Today's episode is about accessibility with Shannon Finnegan, a multidisciplinary artist making work about disability culture and access. In 2018, Shannon received a Wynn Newhouse Award and participated in Art Beyond Sight's Art + Disability Residency. Last year, she was a resident at Eyebeam. Shannon will share about what access means to her and her work as a disabled artist interrogating access and ableism. Please note: we recorded this conversation in early 2019. Are. You. Ready? Away we goooooo! [electronic beeping]

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

ALICE: So, Shannon, thank you so much for being on my podcast today!

SHANNON: Oh, thank you for having me. I'm a big fan, so it's really a pleasure to be here.

ALICE: Well, I'm a big fan of your work, too. And I wanna thank my friend, Liz Jackson, for telling me about your work. I think Liz said, "You should really check out Shannon Finnegan's artwork. It's amazing."

SHANNON: [chuckles]

ALICE: "We all have common kind of loves and priorities toward expanding the idea of access and disability culture." And I was really just so blown away about your work. Would you like to introduce yourself, if you don't mind?

SHANNON: Sure. So, I'm an artist, and I work in a lot of different ways, kind of depending on the project and the ideas. But I feel like the kind of common thread that runs through a lot of my work is a focus on disability culture and accessibility and thinking about what those things are and how we kind of approach them in nuanced and varied ways.

ALICE: Mmhmm. Great. And today's episode is about accessibility, and this year, you were named the 2019 Eyebeam Access Resident. So, for the listeners who don't know what

Eyebeam is, can you describe that and then tell me a little bit about how's your residency going so far?

SHANNON: So, Eyebeam is an organization that supports artists and technologists, and so they're really at that kind of intersection of art and technology. And each year, their residency has a theme. And so, my residency cohort is themed around access, and I think, thinking about that pretty broadly. But it's been really incredible. It's an 11-month residency, and I get access to studio space and I'm also paid to participate in it. So, it's allowed me kind of time to focus on my work in a way that I haven't had before.

ALICE: Mmhmm. And I know that when we see the word "access," it's used broadly, especially by non-disabled people. And disabled people, when they see "access," they have kind of like—

SHANNON: [laughs]

ALICE: Like when you're leaning very close to their lived experiences, so I'm really curious about what you've learned from your fellow artists at this residency in terms of their conceptions of access compared to your ideas of access.

SHANNON: Yeah, I think I'm someone who...you know, I think it's hard to separate out access around disability from other systems of oppression. And so, some of the artists in my cohort aren't necessarily thinking through a disability lens, but I feel pretty aligned with the type of work that they're doing and this kind of like more general approach about thinking about who's kind of like not in the room or who's not part of the conversation and how can that be changed. So, one example is a group called Movers and Shakers, and they're using augmented reality to create digital public monuments that represent the voices of marginalized communities and thinking about all of the gatekeeping around public monuments in different cities around the country. And how, right, there's this idea of access around kind of like pushing back on those gatekeeping systems and also creating access to histories that don't get focused on.

ALICE: Mmhmm. Wow. That sounds really interesting.

SHANNON: Yeah, it is. It is, really. Yeah. There's a lot of great projects happening here.

Shannon's access and advocacy experiences

ALICE: So, if you don't mind me asking, I guess, how does access affect you personally throughout your own interactions in built and social environments?

SHANNON: Yeah, no. I think for me, a lot of my access needs are around kind of like standing, walking, moving, carrying things. I need a lot of rest. You know, I experience pain when I'm walking and standing, and so kind of also just navigating that. Another big one for me is knowing where the bathroom is, having it close by, not having to wait a long time to use the bathroom. So, yeah, those are kind of the main things that I'm kind of balancing and navigating when I'm thinking through access.

ALICE: Mmhmm, mmhmm. And I think, you know, a lot of people who advocate for access, they're doing it because they believe in it. But also, for many folks, they're not impacted personally by it. So, what do you think are some of the nuances in terms of those who are

advocating for access but who are really like their lives are at stake because of it, in terms of the difference in terms of how they approach and think about access and advocate for it?

SHANNON: First-hand experience with needing access, at least for me, has made it just so clear that access is always something that I'm paying attention to, that I feel a responsibility towards, because I know even if my access needs are being met in this space, that doesn't mean that other people's access needs are being met. And I wanna be part of, yeah, making it as accessible as possible. And I think I think also a lot about.... Well, maybe this is a little bit of a different idea. But I mean, I've been thinking a lot about just as an artist what my responsibility towards access is. And I have a lot to learn because as we know, organizing across disabilities, there's a lot we don't know even about each other. And so, I've been thinking a lot about that and just about how I don't wanna be part of something that disappoints other disabled people in ways that they've been kind of let down or disappointed before. And so, just trying to always advocate for as many layers and types of accessibility as possible in spaces that I enter.

[upbeat jazzy saxophone music break]

ALICE: I do think that, in a lot of way, arts community isn't all that accessible for all kinds of people. When we talk about museums, we talk about galleries, we talk about public installations, what are some ways the arts community excludes disabled artists and the general public through inaccessible spaces, their behaviors, behaviors and their practices? Are there some things that you've experienced as a artist or things that you've observed?

SHANNON: Yeah. I mean, it's really like there are just so many. [chuckles] You know, I think the arts community is, like many communities, is doing, at least some places are starting to do some learning around it. But there's a long way to go. And I think sometimes I think about the accessibility that I want in the world, I think of it as a very long-term project, I think kind of because of some of the things we were talking about in terms of the ways that different systems of oppression are intertwined. And so, I really see accessibility as a very kind of radical project that's gonna have to, yeah, change a lot of different systems. But then I also look around in the arts community, and I see all of these things that just feel so simple and easy, and I'm just always surprised at how even those things aren't happening.

One that I've been focused on a lot recently is benches in gallery spaces. You know, it feels like, yeah, like we could have that tomorrow if we decided that was a priority. And I so often go to museums where there's just a couple benches, and there's always tons of people on them. And definitely for me, it's like I need to rest as I'm moving through the space. It's too much standing and walking for me. And so, yeah, just things like that where I'm like, let's do it now! [chuckles] And yeah. But I just I think of it as you know, there's so many things in the art world in terms of economic barriers and other types of inaccessibility that I think are very wrapped up in accessibility for disabled people.

ALICE: Yeah. And I also wonder what you think about, you know, I think it's really similar in other fields, but there's still a lot of disabled people who don't identify or disclose.

SHANNON: Mm.

ALICE: So, a lot of people, it's like, well, we don't disabled people in our community. Or who are the disabled artists? And I think, at the same time, it's important to be visible, but on the flip side,

it places a lot of the burden of not only just representation, but having to do a lot of this kind of free labor and education for folks who are like, oh, you're the one disabled person I know who's an artist like me. And then, please educate me, you know. So, have you dealt with that in terms of just being really open about who you are, but also having to feel like, do you feel alone or not alone?

SHANNON: Yeah, I think a lot of, I definitely feel this with different institutions or organizations that I've interacted with where, through their relationship with me, they think that access will be taken care of, even if that's not what I was brought in to do, and that can be really frustrating. I think it's this really tricky balance where I think of disabled people as kind of the core audience for my work. And because lots of galleries and museums and exhibition spaces aren't thinking about accessibility, I feel like I need to kind of be proactive about making my work accessible. But at the same time, I don't wanna take on accessibility in a way that relieves a venue or an organization of their responsibility towards accessibility. And that, I find, is a very tricky thing to balance.

[upbeat jazzy saxophone music break]

Creating art for a disabled audience and the Anti-Stairs Club Lounge

ALICE: And you mentioned that most of your work is intended for a disabled audience. Have you received any pushback from that in terms of oh, why are you being so narrow? Or why such a small fragment? Shouldn't you be aiming for everyone? Do you get those responses?

SHANNON: Mm. I have gotten that a little bit. I'm always surprised when I get that reaction from non-disabled people because there's just so many things that are made for non-disabled people. And so, I'm always surprised when they feel kind of taken aback or entitled to the work that I'm making. But my hope is that they're.... You know, I think a lot of times non-disabled people haven't experienced my work. It just might be more of an experience of being on the outside and looking in. But I think my hope is that what they're kind of looking in on is this incredible and interesting community, and that that makes them feel like it's something that they want to support and pay attention to.

ALICE: Yeah. And related to that, I think about the arts community and inaccessibility, can you tell me a little bit about a project of yours from 2017 called the Anti-Stairs Club Lounge? Because I think I'd really love to hear the origins of that.

SHANNON: Yeah. So, I mean, it's really a project that came out of this kind of question of like, what do I do as a disabled artist who thinks of disabled people as a core part of my audience in an inaccessible exhibition space? So, the Wassaic Project's exhibition space is this building called Maxon Mills. And it used to be a grain elevator, so it's this very vertical space. It's seven floors, and there's no ramp or elevator access above the ground floor. So, they hold this big group exhibition of emerging artists every summer. There's usually about 50 artists. And I'd say about a third of the exhibition or maybe a quarter of the exhibition is on the ground floor, and then the rest of the work is upstairs. And so, I wanted to do something that kind of added to the space that create an experience for disabled visitors that was also just really clear about the inaccessibility of the space and the kind of limitations of that. 'Cause I think a lot of people, a lot of non-disabled people, come to the space, and they troop up the stairs and never think about who's not in the space.

And so, I created this installation called The Anti-Stairs Club Lounge that's an enclosed space on the ground floor. It's this little room, and inside, so, inside the lounge, there's seating, there's chilled seltzer, and there's room for a wheelchair user to maneuver around the space. There's some candy. There's a charging station for cell phones. There's reading materials. So, any kind of like lounge amenities that I could think of. And then the way the lounge works is that in order to get access to the space, you have to sign in at the front desk, signing this little certification that you will not go upstairs in the exhibition space. So, the lounge becomes exclusively for people who are staying on the ground floor. And there's a little kind of like keypad entry. Yeah, and so, it's a little bit similar to what we were talking about. I think of disabled people or people who wanna stay on the ground floor as the core focus of that project. But I also think the experience that a non-disabled person has of it is really important. Which might just be not going into the space and hopefully being prompted to think about kind of the accessibility of the space more broadly.

ALICE: Yeah, and it feels like you're kind of flipping the idea of exclusion or exclusivity, right? You're making this lounge feel like a VIP, disabled-people only.

SHANNON: [laughs] Yes, exactly.

ALICE: Non-disabled people, you lose out on this if you wanna go upstairs. So, it's really making it a loss for non-disabled folks who wanna experience the lounge, but they can't if go upstairs, supporting an inaccessible space.

SHANNON: Exactly.

ALICE: Which is really nice. It's like a nightclub.

SHANNON: [laughing] Yeah.

ALICE: Like there's a bouncer and the velvet ropes, and you can enjoy the candy.

SHANNON: [laughing] Yeah!

ALICE: And it's like, it's taking exclusion that can feel isolating and basically infuriating and hopefully, I think it sounds like you're creating a space for us by us, which is actually really powerful.

SHANNON: Yeah, no. Exactly. That was my hope for the space.

[upbeat jazzy saxophone music break]

ALICE: Again, you know, the title, Anti-Stairs, I think speaks to this idea that so many people just don't even think about stairs.

SHANNON: Yeah.

ALICE: Because, it'll just take a minute, and it's just embedded in their everyday lives. And they don't think about it critically, or they don't even find it problematic. I'm gonna segue into another example of abominable stairs.

SHANNON: [laughs]

ALICE: I had to think about getting to, I was very recently in York City. There was a public structure called The Vessel, created by Thomas Heatherwick and Heatherwick Studios that opened as part of this Hudson Yards redevelopment project. And this thing cost like \$200 million. It has 154 flights of stairs. Almost 2,500 individual steps. And it's described on its website as, "a spiral staircase. A soaring new landmark meant to be climbed." So, I'm really curious about your initial response to The Vessel when you learned heard of it and when you first saw it and whether you find the structure offensive to you as an artist or as a human being.

SHANNON: [laughs] Yeah. I mean, I think it was interesting thinking about what my...it's interesting thinking about what my initial response was. Because I think my initial response was kind of like an eye roll, you know. Like I think I just feel so used to inaccessible things and used to being disappointed. And then it was really like, the more that I thought about it and read about it, the angrier I became. And I think a big part of that was that we're so often told that things can't be accessible because there isn't the budget. And so, to have something that has a \$200 million budget and it isn't accessible is pretty outrageous. And I think also, I've been thinking a lot about public space, and I think there's also this kind of like snowballing problem that happens where, when there's a really high-profile project like this that's inaccessible, disabled people are pushed farther out of the imagined public. And then that kind of snowballs because then we're farther from the minds of architects, city planners, designers, event planners when they're creating new things. And so, I think that was something else that just felt really infuriating about this structure, is that kind of erasure.

ALICE: Mmhmm. Yeah. And it just seemed to be like another example of how design and architecture just perpetuates and reproduces marginalization again.

SHANNON: Yeah.

ALICE: This is sending a very clear cultural message, social message that some people are not thought of as the public.

SHANNON: Exactly.

ALICE: We're not counted, or even in their minds as a potential visitors. And that says a lot about ableism in our society. And you know, again, when I saw the first photos of The Vessel, I mean, like you, I rolled my eyes.

SHANNON: [chuckles]

ALICE: I felt like it is a monstrosity.

SHANNON: Yeah.

ALICE: Because there's all these kinda staircases. It just seemed very bewildering and confusing and really scary as well. Because you mentioned benches inside museums, but there are no benches inside this.

SHANNON: Yeah, yeah.

ALICE: So, we can imagine anybody—just children, older adults—going up and down The Vessel, and then, what if they get tired? What if they trip? This is like, to me, a huge liability issue because it's gonna be crowded. It's gonna be people just going up and down, and just what if something happens where people need to stop and rest?

SHANNON: Yeah.

ALICE: And that really scared me, and it really just made me so upset to think about visitors who might be just completely, not just wiped out, but just harmed by this.

SHANNON: Yeah.

ALICE: And it's billed as a super shiny, sexy Instagram-made kind of thing to do.

SHANNON: [laughing] Yeah.

ALICE: And it's just, to me, it's totally the opposite.

SHANNON: Yeah.

ALICE: And somebody I remember on Twitter, just tweeted. I was like really snarky about it. And then somebody was like, "Oh, it's accessible. There's an elevator."

SHANNON: [laughs quietly]

ALICE: And then I was like, "Actually, the elevator only goes up to the very top." So, really, somebody with mobility disabilities or anybody who wants to use the elevator won't be able to enjoy the entire structure, right? They can only go from the bottom of the top.

SHANNON: Yeah.

ALICE: That's not equality. That's not access, in my mind.

SHANNON: I mean, I totally agree about the elevator. It literally makes no sense. And it's, you know, you can go to the top, but there's stairs on every level. So, it's not like you get to the top and you can even move around at all. Because it's always up and down. And then just it's clear from the way that it's talked about and the way that it's presented, that the whole experience is about climbing stairs. But I was really surprised at how powerful the phrase "ADA compliant elevator" is in terms of washing away concerns about accessibility. You know, I saw that repeated over and over in articles. And that there just wasn't the kind of interrogation of what that meant and actually how that would function.

Another thing is that they've said that the elevator is only for people who have, I think the phrasing I heard was mobility needs, which is also just such a weird choice and pushes back against so many best practices around accessibility: the idea that they're policing who can and cannot use it and how they're making those choices and the kind of stigma and the burden that that puts on, I think, especially people with invisible disabilities, just really, yeah.

The Anti-Stairs Club Lounge pledge to not go up The Vessel

ALICE: So, you and a group of folks gathered, and you set up another Anti-Stairs Club Lounge in front of The Vessel where you distributed pledges to folks to ask them not to go up to The Vessel. So, how did you organize that, and how did that go?

SHANNON: Yeah. I mean, I think once I saw the plans for The Vessel, I knew that I wanted to do an Anti-Stairs Club Lounge project there and respond to it that way. I think I was really thinking about, I think the best protest of The Vessel is just to be together in public space and demonstrate how we want to use public space. And so, for me, some of those things are like lounging, chatting, hanging out, resting. And so, that was a big part of the lounge, was we kind of took over these bench and tables and chairs that were existing. And then I brought cushions and reading materials and these bright orange beanies for people to wear. And yeah, it was just, it was really wonderful. I think it was just really great to bring a community together around this and just to get to hang out together.

ALICE: And I guess engaging with the public, especially those who are on their way to visit The Vessel, what were their thoughts in terms of the pledge, and what disabled folks were asking in terms of just understanding that it's an inaccessible structure?

SHANNON: You know, it was very crowded. It was kind of like a Times Square-like environment. So, a lot of people were just kind of like, there's The Vessel, that's where I'm headed, and would kind of breeze by. A lot of people had a reaction which was kind of like, oh, I hadn't thought about this structure in terms of accessibility, but now that you mention it, yeah, of course it seems like that's really a problem. I understand why you're doing this. So, that made a lot of, that felt good to have that reaction. There were definitely a few people who were kind of like, you know, a little bit dismissive or kind of didn't feel like what we were doing was important.

But I think, again, it was like the most important thing for me was that the people who gathered had a positive experience and had an opportunity to voice an objection to The Vessel. And then kind of the outward-facing part of that, you know, I kind of felt like some people are gonna, this will shift some people's perspective of this, but maybe not everyone.

ALICE: And in a recent Q and A with you and the choreographer/dancer/artist Alice Sheppard, you said, "There are many creative and exciting ways to approach access that could be very generative." So, why is it important for people to expand what access means, and the idea that it could be a source of joy and beauty?

SHANNON: Yeah, I think it's because the way that people treat accessibility is often the way that they treat disabled people. And so, when they treat access as a burden, they're treating disabled people as a burden. And when they treat access as a source of joy and beauty, then they start to understand, yeah, just the joy and the beauty that's in our communities.

ALICE: Mmhmm. That's perfect. I love that, and I totally agree with you a thousand, million times.

SHANNON: [laughs]

Wrap-up

ALICE: Well, Shannon, thank you so much for being on my podcast today.

SHANNON: Oh my gosh. My pleasure. I mean, it's just so wonderful to talk with you about these things and things that you've also thought so deeply about. It's just really wonderful.

[hip hop music]

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the *Disability Visibility Project*, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find out more about Shannon's work on my website.

The audio producer for this episode is produced by me, Alice Wong. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets! Byeeee!!