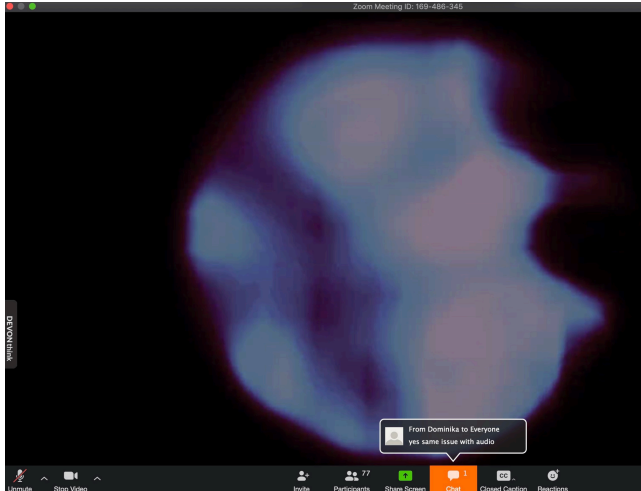




CHARLES EPPLEY

Interview Date: December 15, 2021

Image Description: Text reads “The Remote Access Archive” atop a screenshot of a Zoom shared screen, which shows a work of art by Yo-Yo Lin. The art is a white and grey blob against a black background. The top of the screen names the Zoom Meeting. The bottom shows a series of grey buttons, along with an orange chat button that is lit up. A speech bubble above it “From Dominika to everyone” says “yes same issue with audio.”

KEYWORDS

2020,
accessibility
infrastructures,
audio, COVID-19
pandemic era,
disability arts,
disability
nightlife, queer,
Remote Access
Party, remote
socializing,
sound
description,
visual description

IDENTITIES GIVEN

white person,
disabled person

LOCATION

United States

Introductions

Kelsie Acton:

So thank you for giving your time. It's much appreciated. I'm going to ask you a whole bunch of sort of context and situating questions, you can always choose not to answer them or answer them in any particular way you choose. So, would you like to tell me your name and give a visual description of yourself?

Charles Eppley:

Yeah, my name is Charles Eppley. I'm a light-skinned white person wearing a charcoal gray hoodie. And I have round metal frame gold glasses and a black beanie with a yellow logo that has a kind of Greco Roman facade. That's the logo for the Internet Archive. I'm sitting in a white room in Cleveland, Ohio.

Kelsie Acton:

Brilliant. Just for posterity, this is Kelsie who's done many interviews for Remote Access Archive. I'm a white woman in her mid-30s, long brown curly hair and I'm sat in my very dim London bedsit.

Kelsie Acton:

So Charles, tell me a little bit about your connection to disability community or disability culture.

Charles Eppley:

Yeah. Well, I mean, I'll be brief. Obviously, that's a question that can be answered with a lot of detail, right, and with a lot of length, and so I'll just be somewhat brief. I'm a person, I'm a disabled person. I have a non-visual disability, one that has been diagnosed and another that is in the process. My connection to disability culture and community has been, like for a lot of disabled people, long and awkward and parts of it have been clear and other parts have been confusing or, you know. It's a constant sort of evolution, right, and changing of one's identity in terms of one's experience, especially in the kind of medicalized society that we're in, like pre- and

post-diagnosis and like how that, how that affects how you see yourself or understand things from the past, in my case, when it wasn't diagnosed.

So in any case, my engagement explicitly with disability arts and disability culture and community has been more active and more conscious in the past four, five years or so. And I can point to a particular experience, which is that through my art platform, avant.org, it's kind of a distributed art and research collective, and so we would do publications, online, and in print, and we do workshops and exhibits and performances, things like that. And for one of the things that we did in 2016, I had commissioned an artwork by the Deaf sound artist, Christine Sun Kim. And it was a sound walk in the Lower East Side, and it was based on a historical piece of sound art called *Listen* by Max Neuhaus, who I wrote my dissertation on, because I'm an art historian. And so I was doing my dissertation on the sound artists, and he did a sound walk in the Lower East Side, right, in the early 1960s. Well, mid 1960s. And so in any case, I knew Christine from just some social things in New York, and I thought, okay, well, it's actually coming up on the, the 66. So that was the 50th anniversary of the piece, you know, 2016, 66, and I thought, okay, well, maybe it's an interesting idea to rethink what the soundscape is, and what listening is as a cultural practice, and how can we understand the history of sonic art from a Deaf perspective, perhaps. And at this point, Christine was already doing a lot of work right around sound and listening and so it just was a great fit. And in any case, that was a moment when my kind of scholarship and creative work really entered into the disability culture space, right, by necessity, right, in working with Christine. And so that got me really thinking about how hearing, right, is... I don't want to make firm distinctions, you know, nothing is a binary, but, you know, hearing is kind of biological practice or function, and listening is more of a cultural or social kind of practice or function, and there's a lot of gray space in between those things. But at that point, as a historian of sound art, right, and sonic art and sonic culture, that's when disability studies, right, disability culture, disability activism, really came into my world in a very conscious way. And actually, I just published an article about that experience in the *Journal of Media, Art, Society, and Technology*. It's about Christine's piece, which was called *Listen* but in parentheses, right, like a

caption, right. And so, you know, people can read that if they want. But in any case, that also, you know, not just in terms of my scholarship and my thinking about sound and listening from a historical and contemporary perspective, right, how is listening culture defined by hearing people? And how does that marginalize, right, people who are Deaf or hard of hearing or whatnot, right? It does that in many ways.

But in any case, it got me thinking more about my own relation to disability. My mother has multiple sclerosis, and for years, right, she's used a wheelchair and living in New York, right, she would come visit me and then we would go to the Metropolitan Museum, or she'd want to see the Rockefeller tree, right, at Christmas time. It's like the New York thing, right? But you know, navigating either of those spaces in a wheelchair is really difficult, right? Just not even those exceptional spaces, but there's the general infrastructure of the city or of any infrastructures, really, not designed, right, for people who use wheelchairs. And even, you know, in the post-ADA world, right, there's still a lot of barriers, right, physical, social, whatever. So that got me thinking more about, you know how this relates directly to my family, and then just understanding that actually, disability culture is the disability itself, right, as a kind of social, maybe a physical, social, and neurological, whatever kind of framework is actually a part of my life, has been a part of my life, in terms of my family, but also eventually, myself.

Recently, I was diagnosed with ADHD. I also have, you know, various other disorders, including an autoimmune disorder, that's currently being, whatever, researched, but in any case, I just started, you know, from, from this point from 2016 and onward to now, I just am increasingly getting closer to disability culture and community and understanding myself as a disabled person, understanding my mother as a disabled person, even though she would never... she does not use that term, right. And she actually didn't quite believe my ADHD diagnosis, you know, because it's just, I'm a 35 year old, and when I was younger, and was, you know, in school and having these kinds of symptoms of that, right, of course, some teachers were noting it, I was able to recently look through all of my

childhood, like educational write ups, and it's like "Charles talks too much, isn't paying attention, would do much better if they could focus, right, yada yada yada." Any case, just, there's a lot of stigma around something like ADHD attention disorders, and especially for someone who's born in the mid '80s, when there was the kind of boom in diagnosis, right, and prescription. You know, that it wasn't, it was kind of maybe seen but not diagnosed or treated, right, until recently.

So now I'm just kind of trying to navigate what that means, you know, for my life at the moment, but in any case, I made a conscious effort to learn more about disability culture, to immerse myself in it, to reframe some of the scholarly questions by linking up with disability studies. I taught a class at Oberlin in 2019 called Disability and Accessibility and Contemporary Art. So that was a seminar, and I worked with students in the museum on campus to talk about access issues in the visual arts space. And around that time, that was the spring of 2020, and that's when I think Remote Access started, right, kind of at the beginning of the pandemic. And so, I'm teaching this class about disability and access, and then I knew Kevin, because I was teaching at NYU, where he was a visiting professor, and so I knew they were doing this thing called Remote Access. And I thought, okay, well, on the one hand, you know, I'm trying to incorporate access strategies into my art historical teaching, right, both in terms of teaching on disability studies, concepts, right, and disability art histories, but also in terms of incorporating image description into just a general art historical kind of education, right. We can talk more about that later on. But I started to think, okay, well, how does this relate to my teaching and practice in sound? And I thought, okay, well, much like art historians are trained to look, right, and to analyze visual imagery, and maybe I can leverage those skills, you know, in terms of image description. I also have a background in sound and listening and music. And so, I can maybe help out with Remote Access by doing sound description, right, which is something that you know, is done, but it's less common than audio description, right of like, describing the environments or the visual information, acoustically, there's less focus on describing the critical information textually right. And so in any case, that's how I linked up with Remote Access, was just through

knowing Kevin from NYU and kind of vibing with him on sound studies, you know, stuff and sound culture, and nightlife, right, dance music, but that was kind of merging with this diagnosis of ADHD that I got as an adult with this, also with this ongoing look into this autoimmune disorder that I have. And then also rethinking about these experiences with my family with my mother and MS, in relation to you know, after this experience with Christine Sun Kim, right, which the experience with Christine was actually really important for me in a personal way, because that really changed how I understood myself, my family, and my kind of position in the world. So I was not brief in that, so I apologize for that, but that's, that's how I can answer that question.

Remote Participation - Sound Description as Creating Access

Kelsie Acton:

No, but thank you, that was like, I think, really incredible context to have for the next few questions I'll ask. So had you encountered sound description before the Remote Access parties?

Charles Eppley:

Not in that capacity. The way that I had encountered it was through, you know, talking with Christine, and through thinking with her about captioning, and what captions are, right. And, and, you know, captions are meant to describe not only the speech. And so, just to clarify, since this is an interview, this is like, you know, televisual captioning, right, on Netflix, or on films, or whatever. So, captions as describing speech, but also describing the environmental sound with soundtracks and films. And of course, the cliché is that, well it's not just a cliché, the reality is that often the captions are very poor. Especially, okay, they can misrepresent the speech, but often, they just don't even try with the non-phonetic sound. So, it'll be captioned "eerie music" or "scary music," but like, why is that scary? Why is... what does "eerie" mean? And so, she has a number of artworks that are about captioning, and that kind of, on the one hand, have limits of

captioning as a practice as it's deployed in, in the like, media economy, but also of expanding it, right, expanding the caption, to include things, in her case, that aren't necessarily purely acoustical, right. So, she does a lot of like psychological and affective captioning in her artworks.

And so, in any case, my experience with sound description was through captioning, right, primarily, and I thought, okay, well, this is like, incredibly limited. And I, you know, I have tinnitus. And so, you know, I am a hearing person, and I'm not quite sure that tinnitus is a disability, but, you know, part of the... as, you know, one of the core ideas in disability, culture, and studies is that limiting what is or is not disability can be a kind of harmful act, right. Marie Thompson is someone who's doing some research into tinnitus and art and culture. She's actually in London, I think, at Oxford. In any case, the point is, I thought that okay, well, I'm a hearing person, and I'm, I'm finding myself in these disability culture spaces, right. And so, within that context of community access, right, of pooling skills and resources to build the access that doesn't exist, you know, in our other spaces, I thought, okay, well, I can, I can hear and I can, I can listen, right, in both senses of those terms. And this is something that I can offer, right, potentially.

And so, Kevin asked if I would do some sound description, I thought, okay, well, I'm not trained in this, but I can try it, you know, and I think I've done maybe... I don't know how many events with Remote Access, and some of the spin-off events, maybe, I don't know, maybe eight to ten events or something with them. And, you know, I learned something new each time, you know, the first time was like jumping into the pool, because, you know, I'm not, I'm not trained in access work, and I'm not trained in audio description, right. There's a whole field of people who do this professionally, and that's not necessarily who I am, although I'm growing that practice a little bit through Remote Access. And so, I encountered it through Christine and then just through, you know, Kevin being like, well, you, you know, maybe you can do this for us, and then it actually ended up being a really great experience and very compelling for me to do and very fulfilling, right to offer that access work, but also people in the chat, you know, seem to

really appreciate it. And there's been a lot of very kind responses, you know, to that work, because often it does kind of get deprioritized.

Remote Participation - Music, Parties, and Accessible Club Culture

Kelsie Acton:

Yes. So, in typical neurodivergent fashion that I'm actually going to, like, give some context for the interview and then ask the next question. So Remote Access, for the record, is a series of online parties that have been hosted by Charles and my mutual friend, Kevin Gotkin, A.K.A. DJ Who Girl, bringing across folks together for like dance and disability, art, and good music. Cause that might be a really important thing for people watching this interview fifty years into the future to know. [laughs]

Charles Eppley:

Yeah, yeah, what exactly Remote Access is.

Kelsie Acton:

Yeah. So now that we've got that context... so you're at a Remote Access party, Kevin starts a song. How do you approach the sound description?

Charles Eppley:

Well... so there are a couple things I can say to that. One is that there are two ways that I've learned how to do it. One is impromptu, and just on the fly, right, like hearing and listening and typing simultaneously, not unlike what a stenographer might do, you know, with speech. I don't know stenography, and so actually, it's very difficult to do that, because I also have some tendon issues, and my hands actually cramp up really easily after a lot of typing and work to the point where I can't move them. And so that's actually not super ideal to improvise, because it's just, it's like constant quick typing for an hour, right? And it's just, that can be painful.

So actually, I've learned, right, this is one of the things that I've learned over

time, is to ask Kevin, or whoever the DJ is, for a tracklist. Right, usually, you know, because I DJ as a hobby as well, since I was like, 14 years old, actually. And so I'm really interested in that, and I know the process that DJs have, which is like they can, you kind of improvise in the moment of time, right to organize the music, but people spend a lot of time picking out the music in advance, right? They don't know what order it's going to go in or what the contrasts going to be or what the exact end result is. But they might know that they're going to play like these six or eight tracks, right, in advance. And so, I've learned to ask, okay, well, what, you know, do you have like a list going, like, can you give me access to that? And then I have that in advance, and I can type out some of the descriptions, like a, you know, a short paragraph of description for each track. And then during the event, I can live copy and paste. And so that reduces some of the typing work and the pain that comes from typing. But that's not totally necessary, because I can do it improvised, too, right, on the fly. And so in that case, the question, I wanted to just point that out, that, you know, it's more, it's kind of better to have the tracklist and front-load some of that work, because you can get more detailed and more creative and kind of, you can even get a bit more poetic too potentially, then if you're doing it live, and so the second part of the question is, what am I listening for, right? Is that kind of what you're asking?

Kelsie Acton:

Yes.

Charles Eppley:

So, you know, much like how you, I hate using like visual metaphors, but I'm trained as an art historian and people are often... people who see are often more accustomed to thinking visually than thinking sonically, so, it might be useful for people listening to this later. But in any case, much like how you might look at a painting and look at the general structure of it, right, you're looking for not only the kind of subject or the content, but also the form and style. You're looking for maybe an overall kind of style or aesthetic, right? If the music is, you know, you want to identify the genre, basically, although genres aren't always super useful, right? But is it, you

know, R&B, or is it house music? Is it rock? Is it instrumental? Is it vocal, right? Sort of get a large overall view of it, right. Like if I was doing an image description of a painting, I might say, this is a ten foot by twelve foot abstract painting with a primary color scheme of blue and pink with orange, right. And then I can get into the details of, in the lower left, there's this, in the top right, there's this, but, you know, set the stage a bit, right, and sort of give the overall, the vibe, basically, of the music. And then from there, what I would do is to try and, you know, explode the song into its components. And I have a background in music, which helps. You know, it's not necessary.

And in fact, I'm not the only person doing sound description at Remote Access. Teresa Suh has done it, moira williams has done it. And some other people who don't, you know, you don't need a degree in music to do this. But basically trying to, you know, explode the song into its constituent parts, right? So, identifying, okay, there's a certain rhythm, right, that has a certain tempo. Well, is it a straight rhythm? Is it a syncopated rhythm? Does it give a kind of driving feeling to it? Or is it more of an asymmetrical kind of jump up sort of skipping type of a thing? What kind of percussion is it? Is it digital? Is it acoustic? What's underneath the percussion, right? Is there some kind of low end bass, you know, line that's going on, or some synthesizer thing? Is there anything that contrasts that? Maybe there's a low, soft, pillowy kind of synthesizer, you know, ambience, and then there's like a high-pitched kind of metallic clinking or clanking noise, right, that's kind of happening up here in the background. Something that isn't necessarily upfront, right, and that's not really perceivable in the big picture frame, but rather, it's being perceived, but it's not standing out, right. It's like, little sonic compliments to the larger structure, right. And so that's when you can get into lots of contrast in harmony or rhythm, in timbre. Timbre basically is just a musical term for like, texture, right? Like what does the sound kind of like feel like? Is the guitar guy clean? Or is it distorted and like crumbly, right? That affects how you interpret the music. And that's how you get different styles, right? In any case, yeah, I would look for the kind of big components, right, that give the general kind of genre or the vibe. Like, even within house music, you can have like a

melancholic house tune, versus a very joyful kind of house tune. But it'll still have a four on the floor beat with an offbeat hi-hat, and then a snare, or a clap on the three and on the two and the four, right? So, despite that, it can have a very different mood, right.

So, in any case, I guess that's kind of a lot of word vomit. But the point is that you can, or what I tend to do is approach it from a pretty descriptive standpoint, at first, right? Like, literally just describe the general sonic structures that are in place. And with music, a lot of that repeats, if it's experimental music, then it kind of changes constantly. But like a house track's gonna have the same kind of percussion, like from the beginning to the end, generally. Sometimes it cuts out, right, and you'll want to mention that, or there's a drop or a build up or something, you know, of intensity, and you need to kind of mention that. But I always, you know, much like with image description, the job is not, well, I don't want to call it a job, but the goal is not to describe the work, let's say, describe a painting for a blind person without giving them any chance to interpret it, right. The goal is to describe the kind of, the sort of the basic structure and the details in a way that's objective. If it's possible to give them the ability to interpret it, right? Because you don't want to create the interpretation for them. And so I tried to do that with sound description.

Like with any art, however, there is, it is a kind of poetic thing. And so there is some utility to some interpretation, right to describe something as being, like an intense build up, or like there's a feeling of, you know, sometimes, I don't know if you've read me, you know, doing sound description, but maybe I'll say, oh, this feels like, you know, driving to your friend's house in the late summer, like, and you know, winter's coming, and you're, you know, maybe you haven't seen them in a long time, and you're glad to see them, but also kind of, like, nostalgic about like, the past or something, right. That's incredibly interpretive and subjective. And I would never put that up front, right. I think that there's something creative about that, and something useful about that. But also, I don't want that to be the main focus, or the only thing that's said, right. So, it's kind of like, that's my interpretation, and I've only given that to you, after I've described what is

going on sonically. And there could be another interpretation potentially. And my interpretation isn't the only one, right? That's just how I'm kind of responding to it in the moment.

I think that, you know, Remote Access is a really great space to experiment with something like sound description and image description. Because it's not, you know, the access work isn't, it's not less important than like in a larger institution, right? If you're going to a Broadway theater play, and you want audio description, you don't want the person to be interpreting the play for you and telling you what it's about, right? You know, you want to be able to come to those conclusions on your own. So, I think that with Remote Access, because it's kind of like a disability arts project in a way, like there's something creative and artistic about Remote Access as an event, that actually, there's room to experiment a little bit with something like image description or sound description.

And so I'm inspired by someone like Finnegan Shannon, right, whose Alt-Text as Poetry is doing something similar with alt-text image description, right? Thinking about, okay, there's the kind of objective like purely access-oriented mode of doing image description, but this is a really vital form that has a lot of creative potential at the same time. And Christine Sun Kim is exploring that with her kind of conceptual captions, right. And I think I'm kind of influenced by that. And so with Remote Access, I'm trying to develop a practice that provides the kind of fundamental access of sound description while also exploring the creative potentials of it. And that can be difficult, I think, because I don't, like I said, you don't want your interpretation to completely overwhelm everything, because otherwise it's kind of useless, right? So, it's kind of finding a balance, right of like, the 75% or 80% neutral description with the 20%, you know, or 15%, subjective kind of poetic description.

Remote Participation - Institutions, Infrastructure, and Pedagogy

Kelsie Acton:

Brilliant. Thank you. That was a really lovely description. You talked a little bit about how your practice has changed over the course of the Remote Access parties. Are there other things that have shifted? Aside from learning about how you work best and sort of developing that like 70/30 split that you're working with now?

Charles Eppley:

Well, what has changed or evolved? I think that one, that's kind of a question about Remote Access, in general, and then there's a question of the sound description practice and then maybe managing that, because Remote Access itself has been changing, I think. I think it started out fairly small, and you know, more people have joined and it's kind of snowballing and in a good way, right? It's like the community is growing. I think there's a certain reputation that is growing for Remote Access. People like it, people want to be involved. It's definitely a community building space, you know, like, there's a lot of strong relationships being formed, I think in Remote Access. And that's really compelling and interesting and vital at this moment, right where we're all often stuck, right? Well, I don't want to use the phrase "stuck," we're all more people are at home, right? A lot of people were already at home, and they weren't given, they didn't have the same access to these cultural spaces necessarily, that maybe Remote Access is trying to build or that spaces like museums and concert halls are doing, but they're kind of doing it out of necessity, right, like, out of economic or financial necessity, not out of a commitment to disabled people.

So, in any case, as Remote Access grows, you'd have to talk with Kevin more, and I think you probably are speaking with Kevin, but there are more requests for Remote Access to be like a service provider, you know, to like, to provide a party or to provide access work for somebody else. And so there's, I think there's a growing question of like, what is Remote Access? You know, is it this disability arts community, you know, internal facing sort of thing? Or is it a service provider where people are being linked up with larger institutions that have larger budgets, right, and are being... that feel compelled to provide more comprehensive access work, right, and access

features in their programming? And maybe how can Remote Access as a community, facilitate that, you know.

And through Remote Access, you know, I've done some sound description work for some, you know, artists and curators, you know, there's a gallery in Toronto. I forget the name.

Kelsie Acton:
Tangled?

Charles Eppley:

Yeah. Right. Tangled. So, they had an exhibition with the performance piece, and so they found me through Remote Access to do some sound description for a performance and installation there. And I know that other people, too, are finding some opportunities, you know, to expand this work, you know, kind of outside of the party itself. But in any case, and so what the benefit of that is that people get paid, right for their work, disabled people can get paid for doing access work.

But in any case, there's a question of like, what is Remote Access, right? And it's growing, and part of it can be kind of unwieldy, because it's all volunteer, right. And anyone who's worked in activist spaces, or community organizing, knows that volunteers are great and essential, but volunteers, you know, they're not being paid for their work, so there's less incentive, maybe for them to... well, I don't want to say incentive, that's kind of like too neoliberal, right. But, you know, people have limited capacities. And so, people want to volunteer, they want to do work, and sometimes they end up not having the capacity for it, or they can't stay on an extra 20 minutes, because the program is running late, right, they have to sign off. And then the access, that point of access is gone, or disappears, or the people who have been, you know, the ASL interpreters that have been hired professionally, stay over half an hour and because of the rates of the billing and whatnot, they charge for an extra two hours, right. Which is, you know, I understand that there's also justification for that, because people hire interpreters, and then they, they bail, right, and they don't get paid.

So, in any case, there's just a lot of like infrastructural, like project management, realities that come into play as Remote Access is growing. And I think with sound description, that is impacted, right, because as I mentioned, it's not just me who does it, there are other people who do it. And so often, you know, there's a group of us who will be working on a Google Doc, you know, like, describing some, some music for the DJ uses it, like the week in advance or something like that. And we, you know, divide the time, during the event like this 15 minutes is Charles and here's moira, here's Teresa, here's Finnegan, or whoever. And, you know, those kinds of structures are... they don't hold because events are fluid, right? Get out if you've done programming at all, but, you know, you started an event, it's late, right, or something happens or, you know, someone goes on longer than, than they were supposed to, or, you know, something just changes right. And so, then those fifteen minutes increments suddenly are shifted by like ten minutes, and you know, then who's going on when. And there's some ambiguity about structuring, like, the workflow, right, the access work among a group of volunteers who all are very dedicated to it, but we all have different schedules, different energy levels. You know, I don't do well with like... I can like vibe with a change, I've done stage managing and theater before, and you kind of have to just, like jump on it and roll with it, but also, like, I would prefer things to be like, as planned, right?

So, I think with sound description in part because, you know, it is the point of access. It can be a creative practice, but it is ultimately originating as a point of access. For people who don't typically have that access point in like clubs or on television, or whatever, it can be difficult to just ensure that that access need is being met, right, because of the logistical problems of just running like a community, kind of grassroots, you know, activist-oriented project that doesn't have a lot of funding, or really any funding. So that would be one thing that's changing is just realizing that, okay, well, this didn't work, so next time, we'll be clear about like, okay, we're not just going to follow it to the time, because the time might change, but we're gonna do an order of this person, to that person, or if someone like, is AWOL or

disappears or has to sign off, like, then I'll come in and anticipate that and like reserve some of my energy, you know, to, to jump in as needed, you know. And so just little things like that, that are kind of more infrastructural are evolving. I don't know if it's better or worse for them to be codified. Like I don't want to come up with like, a sound description policy, right. And I don't think that I'm... I couldn't do that alone, and I wouldn't want to do that alone, I shouldn't do that alone. And I don't know if that should even exist, right, in this context. But there is this kind of like tension between the sort of, you know, activist improvisation and, like, the organizational need for some structure, and I think Remote Access is kind of going through that phase.

Kelsie Acton:

Yeah. That's super interesting, because what I hear in that is that, in many ways, organizing things remotely and digitally, a lot of the growing pains are the exact same things that we would hit in in-person events and in-person organizing. Yeah.

Charles Eppley:

Yeah. But it's really exciting too because there is much more online programming than there was before. And maybe this is something that... well, it doesn't matter if this is for an archive, it's fine. I was interviewing recently for a job at a museum. That... it was like a public programs, sort of, type of, administration type of job. So basically, like coming up with programming relating to the exhibits. During the interview, you know, one of the things they asked about and one of the things I've written about in my cover letter was the need to kind of grasp on to this moment, right, like this energy of online programming, and of like digital programming and remote access, basically to like, talks and artists lectures and interviews and exhibitions that are in-person, like represented digitally, but also in organizing digital only, you know, events, including exhibits, right. And I was like, you know, they were kind of interested in that, you know, because they need to be, you know. They need to be held to commit to access in all of its forms. I think a lot of museum leaders are feeling that pressure that's being placed on them, and they understand it and they are trying to support it at

the moment.

My fear is that it'll go away, right? Education departments and museums which have been the locus of access programming for decades are being gutted, right? Like major museums and smaller museums are just closing entirely. And you know, ultimately, museums, even if they're nonprofits, they operate like businesses, right. And so the bottom line is often really important. Education, access ends up being cut. One way... one of the things I mentioned to them, and this is maybe a long, tangential descriptive story but was that, you know, access needs to be woven throughout the museum, not just in the Education Department, right. The Education Department and the existing access initiatives need to be funded more than what they are and strengthened, but access needs to be something that is found in all levels of the museum, from leadership all the way down to like the gallery. And that includes curatorial work, right, doing like access-oriented shows. So in any case, one of the things I mentioned was like, if I got this job, I would expect that we would continue doing remote programming. And I think I mentioned that it was like a moral obligation to continue this type of remote access. And I didn't get the job, eventually. [laughs] And there were various reasons for that, I'm sure. That wasn't the focus, or the sole reason; I'm sure the person who got it is totally great.

But I have found the kind of like, this resistance to like, oh, well, we're going to do this forever? Right? Like, I think that there's this idea in cultural spaces, that remote programming is a COVID thing. And what I think, is that COVID, and this is like COVID cultural response, right? Where remote access and programming has been supported because of COVID, but it's been maybe supported for the... I won't say the wrong reasons, but just for a different reason than access. And that access needs to be the focus of it, and it needs to be continued, right. In... I don't want to say post-COVID world because I'm not sure that that exists, right? But the point is that remote access needs to be continued, right, and needs to be continually funded and expanded. And I'm not sure that like cultural spaces really understand that yet, or that they have the infrastructure to, but I don't think they've invested in infrastructure to make that commitment.

Kelsie Acton:

Yes, sorry, my like nerdy cultural... because one of my other, a lot of my other jobs is in culture, but mostly performing arts, I'm gonna like restrain that urge to share all the things with you in your interview. [laughs]

Charles Eppley:

So, you know, then, right, the kind of tension between wanting to be seen to be supporting access versus actually restructuring the institution to have access be like, not just something that's, you know, kind of marginally supported, but that's like the foundation of the institution.

Kelsie Acton:

Yes. Yes, deeply. Or my favorite thing is oh, we budgeted for it, but then, like, didn't have the time or the capacity to... sorry, that's a rant, but yeah. I wanted to circle back. You'd mentioned image description in art history education, and it's clear you're like pulling from image description practices to make analogies... That was the wrong word, but to talk about how you do sound description. Do you want to tell me more about that?

Charles Eppley:

Yes. So, image description... it has a long history, right? And what I don't want to do is say art history can improve image description practices, because that's not true, right, necessarily, because there's a whole profession and culture of image description that exists totally independently from art history, right? So it doesn't, I'll be clear that it doesn't need our history to be wonderful and great and to do what it's doing, right. It's already a fantastic... it has fantastic history and culture to it, right. But what I kind of came to as someone who has a PhD in art history and whose job at various points when I'm employed, which is not at the moment. I was a visiting assistant professor at Oberlin College in the art history department. So, you know, and before that, I, you know, I've been teaching college courses for like, fourteen years or something now at this point, so, and I'll be teaching in the spring, too, so it's fine.

But the point is that it was my job to describe images, right, like in the context of art history, and not only to describe images and interpret them, but to teach students how to look, right? And how to see, which is kind of analogous to like, how to hear and how to listen, right, in a certain sense. And so one of the fundamental kind of assignments, you know, of art history and of art history courses, which is a very visually-oriented discipline, right? I mean, it's kind of presumptuous to say art history when really 85% of it is talking about visual art, right. And so, my background as an interdisciplinary sort of sound, multisensory art historian is, you know, I can talk about that, too.

But the point is that what I kind of identified, you know, in my teaching, was that, okay, well, this is actually, you know, I'm learning more about image description, and, you know, in a disability and access context, and alt-text, right, and how, you know, because those are different things, right, which, of course, you know, but just for the state of the interview, and whoever's listening, right. Image description is a little... they're both short form writing of like descriptions of visual imagery, image descriptions are a little longer. And alt-text is briefer, right, and meant specifically for like, metadata, like for web content, or digital content. In any case, I just kind of, you know, one of the core assignments in our history is the formal analysis paper. And that's like a five page paper, right, where the student goes to a museum, finds an artwork, and then looks at it. And in looking at it, tries to see it, right, so tries to interpret, tries to perceive all the visual forms that they see, and then tries to interpret it, right, according to what they're learning in class. And you can, that's not even to get into, like cultural interpretation, but just purely aesthetic interpretation, where you can interpret it through style differences, or through gestures and things like that that the painter, right, or the sculptor may have made. And so, the point is to get them to look really closely, right, and to look at things, to think about the things they're looking at, right? And to look at them again, in that overall structure. And then in the minutiae, right, in the details that complement each other or reinforce the overall structure or contrast the overall structure or whatever. And so, you know, I was just thinking, Okay, well, this is ultimately, like, kind of similar to image description, right? And so the art history essay, it's like

every Art 101 class has it, right, like you look at a painting, you describe it, look at a sculpture, you describe it.

And I'm doing, you know, at Oberlin, I was teaching this seminar on disability and access in contemporary art. And working with linking those students with museum staff, right, to talk about access and to create some image descriptions for the museum. And I thought, well, why can't I just do this in my art history class? Why is this something that is purely relegated to the disability studies seminar, right? Why can't I introduce image description and alt-text as an art historical kind of method, right? Or like, you know, how can I leverage these art historical assignments and skills students are learning and have them learn how to do image description and alt-text, maybe even produce some of them.

And I had at least one student actually produced some for the museum from that class for works that didn't have descriptions. And at the same time, I can introduce them, you know, in the kind of like art history survey, to pretty specific and broad concepts from disability culture and disability studies and disability justice, right. And so they can go to a museum and think about, you know, maybe how not just like, oh, this is like a cubist painting, and it represents like, pre-war, whatever, like, interpretations of time and space, but they can think about, okay, well, how is the museum, like framing this work? And how is it allowing people to have access to this visual material and visual information? Because if you go to a museum, you know, the description is like, there's a biography of the artist, or there's like a curatorial statement about the work, what the work means and it's all like top down, right, interpretations. So you don't have to actually think about what you're looking at. You know, the museums could offer an image description, as well, and they do in some audio tours. But, you know, like with captions, those aren't always very good or thorough, and they can often reinforce the curatorial position a little, too much.

So in any case, I thought, okay, well, in our history surveys, I can just, especially if there's a relationship between the program and a museum, right, like at Oberlin, there was, but many universities and colleges have

like a campus gallery, or museum or collection, or something that I can actually pair these students with like objects in the collection that don't have image descriptions or images on the website that don't have alt-text, right. And we can use this to one, learn about how to look and analyze visual information in a different number of scales, from like the five page essay, to the short paragraph to the one or two sentence of the alt-text. It's kind of like scaling from, like distilling information into it's like, you know, primary components at various levels. I can teach them about disability culture and access, and also maybe even produce some content, like some image description material for museums that, you know, in talking with one of the Oberlin staff members, they don't have the budget to like, go through every image in their collection to write an image description, you know, for the website or for the gallery or something. And so, you know, they should, right. There should be someone that is hired and paid to do that, but, you know, in that case, I thought, okay, well, maybe I can, I can incorporate some of that work like into the class.

So in any case, one of the things, you know, that I've learned as an art historian and as a teacher, in my pedagogy, is that, okay, I can talk about disability in art, and I can talk about disability aesthetics and depictions of disability or work by disabled artists and disability arts as a kind of cultural history and framework. But also, I can model access not just in, like, in various ways that I do already in the syllabus, but I can incorporate, like, access work into the assignments, which can, you know... what's the word, it can help me achieve numerous goals of helping them learn how to perceive and interpret visual information at different scales, learn about access and disability, and then actually produce materials that people might find useful.

Kelsie Acton:

Yeah, sounds brilliant. Thank you.

Charles Eppley:

Yeah. So I mean, I would love to see it just like incorporated into the field, right. Like, it seems like a very obvious thing, especially considering that

image descriptions are so important for museums, right, like why aren't we leveraging our collective resources here to really support this asset that would really help, you know, be helpful to a lot of people?

Remote Access Now

Kelsie Acton:

Yes, yes. So, coming back to Remote Access, is there anything else you want to tell me or tell the archive about Remote Access?

Charles Eppley:

I think that one of the things that's really central to Remote Access that often isn't emphasized is that it's a very queer space.

Kelsie Acton:

Ooh, tell me more about this.

Charles Eppley:

Well, it's one of the things... there's a lot of queer people involved, right, including myself. There are... there's just a lot of you know, part of this is coming maybe from, you know, how Kevin is kind of framing it in terms of nightlife, right, club culture, which is very much like comes from queer roots, and has this certain queer context today, despite it being like capitalized through electronic dance, you know, EDM, right? Like economics of like the big festivals, whatever, like, there's still a like, very queer foundation of like club culture that exists today, especially in New York, right? Where I know not everyone... the point is that not everyone in Remote Access is like in the same place, but Kevin's in New York, like I met him in New York, a number of the people are in New York, or other cities, where there are like queer raves or queer clubs or whatever. You know, DJ Who Girl, right, like, I'll let her speak for herself, but like that's kind of coming from drag performance. And we've had a number of trans and nonbinary people involved like in the project.

And I think that one of the things that might be missed in like the long historical view of it, is that... it has an intersecting energy of how disability culture relates to current LGBTQ activism and queer culture and the history of dance music and the history of creating cultural spaces for a marginalized social group. And in the past, I'm not a scholar of like, either dance music or of like disability culture, and in the sense that I can speak on that with like, a lot of certainty, I'm not the person to do that. As far as like speaking of disability cultural spaces, right, like, historically, but my impression is that maybe queer culture and disability culture, they have a shared kind of history of creating spaces for themselves, right, of creating a space where disabled people can be disabled in a number of different ways, right. And they can create community and create culture within that context. And that's at the heart of like disability arts, the movement of like, from the 70's and 80's, continuing today, like, that's really central to that. But also like in dance, music, and nightlife there's a similar and simultaneous, I think, historical lineage of creating these kind of autonomous spaces. And Remote Access is linking those two things and creating like a disabled nightlife that is pretty queer, and not exclusively so, right. It's not a queer project, right? But it happens to be that there's a lot of queerness in it.

And so, it's about disability, and it's about disability community, but it's also highlighting at this moment in 2021, almost 2022, where, you know, we have like, okay, in the context of COVID, you know, there's this rise of remote access programming, but what is, what's the expense of that? It's like, this culture of death, right, that we've just hit. So for the record, right? We've just hit 800,000 deaths in this country. Okay, and most of those people are Black or people of color. A lot of them are disabled, right? And disabled people, immunocompromised people are really being thrown under the bus in the pandemic, at the same time where we can celebrate, like the rise in remote access, right. And so, you know, I think there's a strong... simultaneously, sorry, my brain is getting ahead of myself.

But simultaneously, we see this rise in anti-trans rhetoric and legislation. We see the rise of abortion bans and restrictions to reproductive health

care. We're seeing the carceral states, right, continue to expand amidst the so-called migrant crisis, right? Families being split up. We have Black people being murdered by police, right? I live in Cleveland, right? Tamir Rice was 12 years old or something when he was murdered. And there's mass shootings, right, there's like, there's all this trauma, right, and violence happening. And a lot of that, obviously, like, you take the intersectional view that gets leveraged and compounded on particular types of people.

And so in any case, I think what Remote Access is responding to is not just the pandemic, right. Remote Access is responding to all of these cultural traumas that are co-occurring. And providing a space of joy in a moment of extreme pain. And that's maybe kind of grim, you know, in a certain way, but I think that that could be lost. You know, if someone's like listening to this, or reading about Remote Access, or like, whatever in a few decades, I hope they do, but it could be lost in the kind of COVID culture context where it's just, you know, oh, there's COVID-19, there's the pandemic, people had to stay home, right. But actually, you know, I think there's a strong political bend to Remote Access. And to something like the Critical Design Lab, even though it's not necessarily explicitly an activist project, there is a recognition of the political impact of these co-occurring, you know, realities that disabled people face, that queer disabled people face, that queer disabled people of color face, right.

And I'm not sure, you know, something like Remote Access can't... it doesn't have the institutional and infrastructural power, right, in society, to alleviate these pains on a mass scale, but it does provide an opportunity to build community and to find joy at this moment of, you know, this moment of pain and mass death, and it's like it really grim to say that, but nearly a million people, right, have died from something that they didn't need to die from. So, you know, it's great that there's this opportunity to do remote programming, but I think undergirding that is the 800,000 people who have, who have died, and not just from the from the pandemic, but all the people who have died from police brutality or anti-trans or trans misogynistic attacks. Attacks on queer people, you know. So in any case, I would just

like to say that, that there's that kind of context of Remote Access that's really important to me at least.

Kelsie Acton:

No, thank you for that. I think... like, I'm really fascinated by what's going on as an access nerd. And there's also tremendous joy for me as somebody who has like sound sensitivity and auditory processing differences whose club space has been not a place I can go ever and suddenly having accessible club space where I can adjust the volume is... So I think I haven't like looked below the surface. But I think listening to you say that has reframed that space for me as deeply political in... not an explicit but in like an effective way where joy is resistance and like community and play around access as resistance to all the really horrific things happening right now. So thank you.

Charles Eppley:

Yeah, of course. And actually one thing that I also would want to mention is that the sound description practice, one, I would love to hear what you have to say about that as someone who has attended and maybe read and listen, but also that recently, we've been talking about expanding it into another project called How We Feel. And that's something that I've started with Finnegan Shannon, moira williams and Teresa Suh. And we did it, it happened twice now. I was only present for the first one. But the general idea is that in this moment where we're gathering in virtual space, and I guess it's pertinent to mention that we're in the early stages of Zuckerberg's metaverse, right, where we're developing a virtual community at a scale that hasn't been developed, right, their second life, right, decades ago.

But now like virtual culture and community is really expanding at an incredible rate where it's been normalized, right, to a lot of degrees. But what that means is that a lot of us, like in Remote Access, we're coming together from all over the world in different time zones, different spaces. And we're, our images and sounds are turned into a flat kind of two-dimensional image or compressed audio, signal, right. And a lot of sensory information is not being conveyed in these spaces. And so How

We Feel is, it's in its early stages, but the idea is that we can try and reincorporate some of basically, like sense sharing with each other, where we can describe how we feel, both in terms of the environment that we're in, like, you know, I could say I'm... okay, earlier, I described like what I looked like, but I could also say that, you know, I'm wearing socks, and that there's a wood floor, and so I'm kind of rubbing my feet back and forth, and it's giving this kind of soft pressure on my feet and also creating a soft, kind of like, hushing sound. My hands are, you know, I'm at a wooden desk. And so, my hands are on the wooden desk, and like, it's kind of kind of sticky, right, because they've been sitting there for a little while, and that it's sort of chilly in Cleveland. And even though I'm inside, I'm near a big glass window, and so the left side of my body is like a little colder than the right side of my body, you know, or I'm drinking this cherry like, seltzer, right, which gives like this kind of textural explosion, like bubbling feeling, with this, like, tart kind of flavor in my mouth, right.

So in any case, you know, there's a lot of like, stuff that doesn't get rendered through Zoom, right. And so How We Feel is just kind of like a meditative opportunity to just think about the physical space that we're in and the psychological space that we're in, like, I'm feeling a little like, sad today, or a little sick or something. Or, like, this sweater is itchy, or something like that. Or this reminds me of like my grandmother, because she always ate like cherry candy or something, you know, whatever. There's, like the slippage between the sensory world and the psychological world, right? So that's something that I'm excited about. Thinking about how sound, that's maybe more of the poetic kind of like expansion of a sound description. But that's something that we started to do. And I think that we're going to try and incorporate as, like a recurring feature of the project.

Kelsie Acton:

Yeah, I was at the one in Bristol, because often I'm sort of like an early to bed kind of human so often Remote Access, even when Kevin tries to schedule it so those of us in London are, but Louise is now in Cambridge and can make it, it's still often a bit late for me, [laughs] but yeah, I thought

it was like a lovely reflection that human beings have bodies, even if we're all in like these little squares on the screen. Yeah, I think the form of it hasn't like, there's some stuff to sort out, but it felt, yeah, really beautiful, and a way of connecting with people that, like I knew a few folks on the call, but I don't know people from New York. And now I feel like I know people a little bit. Yeah, yeah.

Charles Eppley:

One of the issues that we need to work on with it, is that I think for the first one, we kind of unintentionally prioritized, like spoken description. And so we didn't really think about how people might contribute descriptions through the chat or through text or through other ways. Even if they can, whether they can speak or not, right, not everyone wants to speak on a call. So, in any case, yeah, I think that it's kind of like a work in progress. But I think that what you said is really important that like, it's important to remember that we have bodies and the bodies can be... our bodies can be a pain in the ass, right, often, but like, we still love them, right? And we still feel things with them and through them and for them. And so I think that as we're like in this early stage of the metaverse, whatever that becomes, it's important to like retain our sense of our body and like its relation to, like, our environment and to be able to share that with other people.

Kelsie Acton:

Yeah, yeah. I was gonna say, is there anything else you want to ask me? That classic final interview question.

Charles Eppley:

No, I think, I think that I'm good. I'm just excited about the project. And I'm really honored that you reached out to me to talk about it. It's been, I think it's been really important for me. You know, on the one hand, it's been fun, right? And, you know, I've enjoyed that. I also, I love learning new skills, right? Especially when they can be used for like, access purposes, like, I've been taking ASL classes, because I ended up in a number of like, pre-COVID, like a number of parties where like, the room was just split, right? Like, there's the people who sign over here. And most, like, people

who don't sign over here, and there's no communication. And like, whose fault is that, right? It's like the hearing people who don't know how to sign, right. It's like, I need to, like I need to do this.

So in any case, doing sound description, right, it's very different from like, ASL or signing, but it's something that I'm finding a lot of value in and finding really important, you know, to invest myself in. And I think Remote Access has been a really great conduit for some of the, you know, the anxiety of the pandemic and the grief of the pandemic, you know, to be able to put that into a community project that can bring, you know, joy to people and build, like, the community has been really, really great. So, I just wanted to say that and thank, you know, Kevin and Aimi and everyone who's involved, you know, in facilitating that. And this archive project, I think, is really, really crucial to document this, especially as like a historian, right? I really understand the value of a conversation like this, which can seem kind of banal, you know, to us, but actually, you know, I don't have the hubris to think someone maybe will be watching this later, but if they do, then there'll be some useful information for them about this particular moment. So thank you for that opportunity.

Kelsie Acton:

No, thank you so much. I've had so much fun talking to you, so thank you.