

Olivia Ting Interview

Claudia Alick: [00:00:00] Olivia Ting. It is so exciting to have you here with us. Could we kick this off with you just telling us a little bit about yourself and your work in the world?

Olivia Ting: . Well, my name is Olivia Ting. And I, I am a hard of hearing visual artist.

I have to say that I actually came to working with sound and music relatively recently because most of my life I've been a visual artist thinking that my, my level of hearing would kind of hold me back from, from working with sound. And so a little bit about my background is that I have played piano since the age of six and somehow music A family moved me.

It's always made me feel at home. But I started, I lost my hearing in my early 20s and and also because I've always had hearing loss you know, my well meaning family has always guided me toward something that's not [00:01:00] sound music. And so, I, my work and career has always moved toward the visual and I became a graphic designer, that's where my degree was.

And I eventually got my MFA in art practice, and again with visual arts. I, my visual work composers designing designing concepts and Sort of like collaging moving images and animations to a video that is intended to be projected into a site specific installation. So you know, the end product is not the video itself, but to be experienced in a three dimensional space.

And also giving the viewer an opportunity to be within that projection. So it's kind of like a fake VR, I suppose. And so moving on, I, I recently got a cochlear implant about five years ago, and that sort of was my, [00:02:00] my eye opener. I just found, realized that music and piano, At first, I thought of it as the perfect reason for me to get back to sound because it was a gauge for me to understand how I was hearing things again with this new device, this assistive device in my head, really.

And then it is really reconnected me to music and sound and, and this is actually really my first big project working with, with my music, my background and I'm very glad to be here.

Claudia Alick: Olivia. That is so interesting. I love hearing about your journey back into sound, starting in sound, going to visual art, being back in sound, and

now it feels like the work you're creating just contains a lot of different aspects of that. Could you talk to us about your [00:03:00] project and and just describe your vision for it?

Olivia Ting: I'm so happy to be a part of the CripTech incubator. Because so I, Began with the concept of researching the similarity and parallel visual. Language and motion American Sign Language, and music conducting. Music conducting is something, although I don't conduct, but it's something I grew up with as a child because my mom would take me to the symphony and, and I, I would watch the movements of the conductor and, and what the orchestra was doing because that, that gave me so much more information about.

understanding the sound that I was hearing. So and, and I also had theory classes in which we had to learn to conduct rhythmically, very simple, simple rhythmic conduction exercises. So and then [00:04:00] I came to my, ASL, American Sign Language came into my life later where I took classes and, and I was just struck by this, this kind of parallel Vocabulary.

So I started with that and then I think that became recording movements and then digitally changing this kind of video footages into extended echoes of this movement so that they became sort of a calligraphic record of movements and, and rhythms. And then, so I always knew that these kinds of videos would be translated into a projection.

So these images are projected into a spatial installation of translucent scrims, fabric scrims, so that It creates kind of a fractured environment, but inviting the viewer to have to put these [00:05:00] bits and pieces of projection. On this fabric and put them back together in their, in their understanding, because that's a lot of how part of hearing folks have to put together lots of bits and pieces of information in our universe to get the big picture.

So yes, that's about it in a nutshell and there's also sound and I began working with the sound. I started thinking about sound and comprehension, and so I also put together a soundtrack, which I collaborated with hearing sound artists who helped me, helped me understand what I was putting together also, so it's been a process.

Claudia Alick: So with these fabric screens, this is really an immersive experience where the audience member is, is moving through this experience. And, and it sounds like every [00:06:00] participant is having a really unique engagement with your piece. Is that

Olivia Ting: so I definitely prefer to work with installation because I would like to invite the viewers to have to move through a space to find their understanding of all the senses, sensory feedback.

Because really that that's the experience that I have as a hard of hearing person because I don't hear anything in stereo. So if I hear a sound, I always have to turn around and look and try to figure out what that sound is. Oh, I have to move around and. See a bit more and then, oh wait, is that turning around?

So wait, where is it coming from? So space is a, is a really big element in, in our experience of understanding our space. Yeah.

Claudia Alick: I'm just curious if there are any audiences that you had in mind [00:07:00] for this piece or, or what you're imagining different audiences their experience will be.

Olivia Ting: I'm hoping that it will be as. Open as possible my direct experience is because I actually grew up in the hearing world as I said, my family was biaural meaning they, wanted me to at least try to, to acclimate to, to hearing hearing practices. And in a way, I feel like I'm always trying to create a kind of an understanding of this sort of alternate hearing experience that, that, that I have.

And as I'm Getting to know other hard of hearing individuals in the Deaf community and learning American Sign Languages. I think I myself am learning a lot about different spectrums of hearing experiences, which is astounding. I mean, it's vast and varied. [00:08:00] So, I hope to reach, to reach out to Non hearing communities and but it's really exciting to be working with the CripTech incubator because we're really working with accessibility.

And so you know, we really have to think about how non seeing individuals will experience this as well. Would it be tactile with touch? So we have, I have also incorporated elements of touch and haptic. Feedback into this into this installation.

Claudia Alick: I'd love to get into the process. And I'm just curious of just how this like you've mentioned the incubator itself on how that's fed the work. How the invitation fed the work and the container fed the work. I'm just curious what has it been like to collaborate with this cohort? And also if you could just name any of the collaborators from the residency.

I just love to hear about process and people. [00:09:00]

Olivia Ting: Yeah, it's been really interesting getting to meet other, other cohorts within this. Because I, I, I personally have had a pretty narrow experience thus far. And, and it's great that Andy Slater, one of the cohorts is, is kind of the opposite of me.

He's not seeing, but so he is super sensitive with hearing, and I, I don't hear very well but I'm super sensitive with the sight. So, and it's. It's, it's almost like a kind of a, a mirror puzzle. Wow, you really see out of the box of how things you interpret. The things that you see or feel or hear, etc. And but I also want to say that the, my Ellen Perlman is, is, was my mentor from the ThoughtWorks site.[00:10:00]

Residency has also been hugely, hugely invaluable in her guidance of just kind of helping me, move through the process and most importantly not to be afraid to just make things and not, and don't question, just go ahead and make them and you'll find the meaning for them afterwards. And trust that you will find that meaning and you will make those, those kind of connections, and the things that you make.

And and I also want to say that I collaborated with CNMAT. CNMAT is the acronym for Center for New Music Audio Technology, which is a huge mouthful. And this is a department at UC Berkeley music department, and they they work a lot with digital . digital sound making and, and composition. And while I have been making most of the sounds but I just had no experience with [00:11:00] the production or the logistics.

And so you know, they have been a huge help in helping me navigate through the logistic challenges. And, and I'm also very, very blessed to have the What you needed to work with the, the music conductors and the American Sign Language. So this, the conductor is Ray Chang, Dr. Ray Chang, who is the director of the Chamber Chorus at Berkeley, and also Zana Simons is a friend of mine who is hard of hearing.

And who is a dancer which makes it even, even better that she really understands the language of, of movements with, with the sign language. So all of this kind of comes together with my research with Beethoven partly because Growing up, he was one of my favorite composers and, and then second of all, he himself is a [00:12:00] disabled artist as well.

So yeah, this has really been delving into one of the pieces I've been utilizing for this project is his Ode to Joy, the Ninth Symphony, which was composed when he was completely deaf. And So, but it, it's also so joyous and and it's

been a really wonderful experience. And, and I, I, I last about not least all, but I also wanna give Lindsay and, and Vanessa and Claudia, huge thanks for encouraging me and, and giving me feedback and also just guiding me step by step through this process.

Claudia Alick: This has been an exciting process and a process that had to be iterative specifically because of the pandemic. Initially, we had planned to get us all in person and share physical space, even more than we were able to manifest. So a lot of our collaborations were remote. There was a lot [00:13:00] of remote collaboration with residencies, but also in person collaboration.

And I know that every artist had a unique experience. How was that how was that remote collaboration experience for you?

Olivia Ting: I'll have to say that the remote collaboration is, is a bit.

It's something to navigate through, you know. It would be really nice to have in person interactions. To, to really kind of see what everyone is working on and in a way, you know, we'll have this big sort of like a big surprise and, and a climax, I suppose when we all come together to the common space at our exhibition.

But yeah, I think it, it really makes us think about. The pandemic, it's just not over really, [00:14:00] and it's something that has really changed us, and we will have to live and work through it. But, but, but most importantly that we can, you know, we still move forward with this residency, and we still have gotten this far, and we still have learned this much from each other, despite the fact that we couldn't do it the traditional way, you know, in person.

Yeah.

Claudia Alick: I would love to talk a little bit about the exhibition. Could you reflect on the key words of our exhibition title and how it relates to you? So this exhibition is a riff on EAT and ours is E A A T. So how do you understand your project in relation to experiment, experimentation, art? Access and technology

memory.

And we can, we can approach those in tiny chunks, you don't have to answer it all at once you could just talk about the [00:15:00] experimentation, or you could just talk about the access. Okay. Okay.

Olivia Ting: But I love the fact that this is about experimentation and and and technology, I think and access wow there's there's just so many things to pull together.

You know, again, really, this is kind of like. an open ended test of faith. You start with technology, and the fact is I, I am not hugely technolog, technological so this has been, no, I'm not hugely, but my work is, is digital in nature, but I guess the way how I interpret technology is maybe a lot of feedback, or censors, or whatnot.

But, no, scratch that. That was like, I'm not sure what I'm talking about. Well, I'll say, I'll say technology, my experience, my, my relationship with technology and [00:16:00] my hearing relationship is through my cochlear implant. You know, and, and I think I interpret that to this kind of digital manipulations of my footages and files, you know, audio and video files that I collect.

And So I think that's, that's my experimentation in interpreting my intake my senses and, and that sort of comes out in, in my experimentations putting them together and, and expressing them visually and Ideally, in this installation and the access is, is, is really open my eye all this education has been hugely educational for me and taking a step back, you know, is that my, my offering of my experience can also been open, open to, [00:17:00] to individualized with.

Other access needs. So as I'm designing this, this experience, you know, how would this site, this visuals be interpreted and thinking about could it be translated into touch and how working with the audio descriptions has been a really eye opening experience too. That was a bit of a ramble, but...

Claudia Alick: No, that was wonderful. So I, oh, okay. So I might want you to just ramble a bit more about. Just like when you say the word, when we think of technology, we're, we're, we're signifying something that possibly what, what does technology even signify? What does that mean in the world? How does that connect to our practice?

And because you said that you were a digital, you were like, well, I'm a digital artist, but I never considered myself somebody who worked with technology. That's what I heard you [00:18:00] say. Was that accurate? Yeah, yeah,

Olivia Ting: absolutely. That, I was trying to struggle what, what technology means in the context of this, this program.

Yeah, so I think there's a lot of kind of art that is really pushing the boundaries of how technology quote unquote technology is Shaping the platform or the medium itself. And where I think, wait a minute, I, I do have a technological aspect to it and how in, in my starting material, which is myself and this, this piece of implant in my head, so, yeah.

Yeah,

Claudia Alick: yeah. I love also that you're naming. I don't know if you identify as a cyborg, but you're naming that you have technology within yourself and that's part of your lived identity. Yes, absolutely.

Olivia Ting: Absolutely. I've been reading some books about the cyborg cyborg [00:19:00] identity and and it's not just a term that, that, Is that applies to people who have access needs, but I think it's, it's really pervasive, you know, with, with AI and, and everybody having this powerful gadget called the cell phone that's pretty much permanently attached to the hand, you know, we're all, we're all at some point cyborgs.

Yeah. And it's just kind of shaping or Guiding how different kinds of cyborg experiences are, I suppose, I think in a way that is relevant to a much broader demographic than kind of just thinking of it as disability art.

Claudia Alick: In a lot of the spaces I work in, we talk about technology and we like to think of it away from the machine.

Technology is not necessarily the machine, so technology, oh lovely, that was my [00:20:00] computer making a very loud noise. I was trying to avoid it, I had myself muted. Anyway, in my practice, we talk a lot about technology outside of the machine. I'm so sorry my all of my machines just made noises, but that was the final alert to let me know that I have something in 35 minutes.

Thank you computers. That's my, that's me being a cyborg, because I need a bunch of devices to keep me on track. In the calling of justice practice, we think of technology outside of the machine. So technology can be a way of running a meeting. A technology can be a way, a book can be technology. And we also think about this in terms of accessibility, like your accessibility aid, for us, we think of it as technology.

So anyway, I just loved your exploration of that term. That was fun.

Olivia Ting: Oh, thank you. Yeah, you know, you're just actually [00:21:00] illuminating me that I have been playing with these kinds of definitions of technology without even realizing it, because I am, as of now, I am accessing and. This podcast by using captions, you know, it's a big part of my accessibility.

And, and actually I even played with the idea of captions in my video itself. And, and I played with that by By messing up, purposely degrading the legibility of the caption because that sort of reflects my hearing and, you know. So, wow, well, thank you. Thank you for really bringing that out and illuminating me.

Claudia Alick: And you're also, you're doing something with access aesthetics. I directed a production of Electra where we got, we got real nerdy. In the set design about what the captions would look like, because the captions for us, they had to be legible, but they also needed [00:22:00] to communicate time of day, they needed to communicate who is speaking they needed to communicate different languages or different emotional weight.

So we were looking at, oh, how, how does a visual font signify something that a vocal tone would signify. And the way you are using. Your captions or the what you did with that language. I got so excited when I saw that it's to me. This is this is art. This is access aesthetics. Does does that resonate with you at all the term access aesthetics and and your work.

Olivia Ting: Oh, wow. Well, that's really exciting. I'm so I'm so glad to hear these kinds of responses and That actually inspires me to push it even more. And, and the funny thing is this also really gives me an opportunity to delve into a lot of background background skill set that I [00:23:00] have. I actually have a degree in graphic design and then, you know, you sort of just take it as soon as a kind of a Commercial scale, but but we, you know, as a person who needs to read caption capture is typography, you know, and I think this is a really great channel for me to explore this kind of typography what is what a typography mean for.

A hard of hearing person, you know, we just have to express so many things, as you just said, you know, the emotion or the the cadence or, you know, beyond pure legibility.

No, I mean, I'm really appreciative of the questions that you're asking. I like how it's sort of taken its path and I think that I didn't think about and think that you asked me like technology, what is technology, right? How do we define

it?[00:24:00] I can't think of anything else. I'm probably not going to use it, but I want to tell you that this conversation is like giving me new ideas to move forward with new work, you know?

Yeah! Yay!

Claudia Alick: Well, well, that is always my hope. If I ever have an exchange with an artist, it is my hope that our exchange inspires you to make more stuff because I love your art. And I love, I love it. So that's so beautiful to hear. I'm so pleased. I'm so pleased. I think we have a few more minutes left. Now I'm just going to ask you questions.

Now I'm just asking you questions. So I'm curious I, what do you feel like the build is going to be like for your, for your installation because your installation is immersive. It's got, it's got fabric, it's got projections, got sound. So yeah, what do you think the process is going to be like for installing your work?

Olivia Ting: Yeah, that's, that's that's something new because, [00:25:00] you know, Probably the first time I have to imagine an installation remotely, you know, not having personally been in the space. So, compliments

Claudia Alick: though I want to give you all the compliments because your renderings have been beautiful and really useful.

Olivia Ting: Thank you. I think that comes from you know a knee jerk reaction. That's a graphic designer, you know, you have to make all these things. Okay, pictures versus after words. I'm just going to make a picture, you know, and then they're like, Oh, I get it. Forget about like trying to describe all these things.

And so I hope you know that that communicates it most directly, the least amount of ambiguity of interpretation, and and I think Melissa has also said that she's also shown us. Diagrams. So I think we're on a pretty good page on, you know interpreting specs and numbers and, and, and [00:26:00] this all comes with work with my plantation architect and she designed the set designing.

And, well, she actually worked remotely from from Seattle so we sort of have had this sort of, you know, having figured out the workflow around it. So I tried it and Vanessa has been really. Yeah. great with suggestions on how to prepare everything, you know, as much as I can. So, I just ordered, I, I bought fabric samples.

I tested them in my garage. Yeah, yeah, and I think, I think, you know, at least I know what it looks like with that fabric. So and I can just go ahead and produce those, those. screens. I have a sewing machine. I can make them. I can sew them. So just bring them all. Yeah, just bring them all down there. Oh, and one thing is that I had a minor setback.

Not a minor. It's kind of a setback. Originally, I was hoping to have a haptic, wireless haptic objects. The [00:27:00] translation of the the Ode to Joy, but my my programmer finally said they can't do the project anymore. So it's like, oh, so there's not going to be a wireless haptic objects, but Lindsay had connected me to another.

another contact at Stampedge, Panama. And so he has a lot of experience with haptic translation, but it would likely be a static, a stationary object. But I was like, you know, how do we utilize a stationary object experience? And so I thought, hmm I found, I went to a swap meet and I found just like old radios and we just take the inside out and attack the haptic drivers.

Yeah. So because it, it makes me think of a story that I read of Helen Keller. She experienced, she had a first experience of Beethoven nine Symphony through this radio or to New York bill Philharmonic [00:28:00] Symphony in the 1920s. 1930s, I believe. And yeah, in a way that that's kind of this sort of a reference to a different way of experiencing it.

So I think maybe I have two of those like old radios. They look really, they look really old and dilapidated, but then I like the idea that Wow. They still have the soul and energy. You know, we just touched on this kind of sonic energy.

Claudia Alick: That is so cool. And I'm thinking about just the interesting resonance between the different exhibitions where the technology that we're going to be physically seeing in say Carmen's piece or Andy's piece will be technology that has the, the optics of the contemporary.

It's going to look like the devices. That we receive sound and visuals from today. Oh, I love, I just love that [00:29:00] you're using an old radio. That, that is so cool. That is so cool.

Okay, it's very good that I asked you more questions.

Olivia Ting: Can I show it to you?

Claudia Alick: Oh, yes, I totally want to see it. Yay.

All right. So I was just chatting extra for my own pleasure, but that was amazing. And you have to include that in the podcast. That was so good. .

Oh! Oh my gosh!

Olivia Ting: Oh! And you can take the stuff out

Claudia Alick: and attach

Olivia Ting: haptic drivers to the inside. And they look, they look like, they look like a vellet, but you know, you can just touch them. So

Claudia Alick: cool. Like. Here's another one. This is so cool. Visually, these are reminding [00:30:00] me of, I'm about to show my age, of like, seeing old fashioned, like, radios and old, old TVs when I was really young.

Oh, wow! Is that cool? Is that, like, from the 1950s? That is so cool looking!

Olivia Ting: I mean, you know, they said that it's non operating, but that's okay, you know, just... Open this stuff and just take the stuff out. Yes.

Claudia Alick: Oh, this is so cool looking and also frankly for my disability. I was excited about the haptic nature of your work but I was nervous about how you were going to offer it to your audience because if it was something where I couldn't control my relationship to it. I possibly would have had to like if you have a haptic device.

I would probably say no to putting it on my body because those vibrations might hurt me, but a device like this, I can control how close I get to it. I might be able to experience some of that [00:31:00] haptic vibrations, maybe even from a distance. I might not even have to touch it. I might just put my hands near it.

So, so there's, there's an accessibility function to, to this for me that I really love as well. Ah, okay. Okay.

Olivia Ting: That's great. That is really great to know. Huh.

Claudia Alick: Yeah.

I'm curious when we, we did a project where we had, we were at Meijer Sound, and we had some artists just experiencing sound that was like, Oh, I don't know the language for it. It was like, sound you couldn't hear, but you could feel it. Sound sounds that were on different vibrations.

Again, not, I have no expertise in this, but it was very interesting. And our deaf artists found it deeply interesting going and touching it and stuff. I'm just curious about. The, the, the haptic nature of your [00:32:00] work, who's the audience for that, or who are the audiences for this part of the work. Mm

Olivia Ting: hmm.

I guess maybe in a way, I'm having these different movements of my, the piece is a kind of a Wow, I just realized I have all that dust from that. A refutation of this assumption that all non hearing or hard of hearing people experience a word through vibrations. So. But, but that said though, you know, vibrations is still really a really important part of how you actually sound.

I think of the, a different a different installation I had been to before, and it was a collaboration with a French musician. And it took place at Mills College and UC Berkeley. And what they did is [00:33:00] they took the massive, massive subwoofers and they were specifically playing a pattern of frequency that humans cannot hear.

No human would be able to hear it, but it's so low that the subwoofers can vibrate it and it's placed on the floor so that you know, this vibration is making this environment vibrate, you know, so, so people could. Go in and touch thing and and it will give them a sense of this, that there's a presence of sound and that there's a presence of the sonic energy.

So I thought that was an interesting way to add to the most you know, everybody says, Oh, well, here's a transducer. Here's a vibrating thing. It's like, well, you know, it goes beyond that. So, you know, I think maybe in a way, yeah. It's a, it's a twist in, in using, utilizing these haptic objects you know, the first, first first tier of the audience are hard of hearing or deaf.

Who [00:34:00] almost automatically want to touch things and they feel it, but the the interesting thing here is working with Lloyd, Lloyd, who is the Kwanma sound designer is that he actually crafts the haptic experience. So you don't just directly take the audio file and then just. have it vibrate like on a speaker because because there's lots of but the whole physics of it's not our frequencies are pretty evil vibrating wise so he's actually hearing it he's a hearing person and

then he will like craft together different kinds of audio files of frequencies to make you feel a translation of that so i think that's really cool yeah Yeah, it's sort of like it kind of opens up this conversation of like this assumption that we are just sort of access sound by by a speaker, but we're actually [00:35:00] creating this kind of a haptic experience.

I don't see a question I forgot what your question was.

Claudia Alick: Well, I'm terrible at asking direct questions. I do paragraphs of speech that have a question somewhere in there. That was amazing. I feel like I just learned something though, and potentially I learned something about some assumptions that I've been making.

I'm realizing I've been feeling all cocky about the fact that I've been booking. I booked Sean Forbes, a deaf rapper. I've been working with disabled artists for years. And I'm realizing I've never had this conversation with a deaf artist about vibrations, what they, like I booked so many deaf dance groups and we had intense conversations about locations of speakers and, and how to make sure the right information was reaching the dancers to do their job.

But I'm realizing I had some assumptions about your [00:36:00] relationship to vibrations. And also I had assumptions. about the types of labor needed to translate vibrations aesthetically to an audience. So you just gave me an education. I liked it.

Olivia Ting: All this is new stuff to me too. Yeah. Create, creating, crafting the haptic expanse, you know, so yeah, it's, it's awesome.

No, it is, this is great. I'm so happy that Lindsay had connected him to me.

Claudia Alick: Alright. So my final question is going to be if you have any advice. For other artists in the field, what's your advice to them? I feel like I'm

Olivia Ting: not qualified to give advice yet.

Five things, you know, I sort of came into this like having no idea how I was going to develop this big, [00:37:00] big connection I made with ASL and music conducting. You know, and but I think I, I, I went to Ellen Parmenter, so just, just make it. Okay, you're talking about movement, just make it. I'm like, but, but, but I, I'm not an expert in sound.

I can't conduct and I can't do sign language very well, so just move. You know how to move. Okay, when you play the piano, you're moving. Okay, just start with that. It was like the simplest thing. And, and then just ask. The first question is going to sound incredibly stupid and obvious, but you just have to do it, because that, that will start opening doors to the next question.

You just need to know what the next question is. I think that's what I learned.

Claudia Alick: Okay, well, we'll stop now. Although I can do this for hours. I can do this for hours. Thank you for your time, Olivia. This was such a great conversation. I'm going to always thank

Olivia Ting: [00:38:00] you. I'm learning a lot too.

Claudia Alick: I love that. I always close out with this speech.

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These works span spatial audio, surveillance technologies, gaming, haptics, and auditory prostheses. E A A T artists [00:39:00] deploy access as a creative form, a liberatory tool, and an experiential technology for sustaining community.