

Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 76: Film Festivals

Guests: Karen Nakamura and Alex Locust

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by [Cheryl Green](#)

For more information: DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/podcast

Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

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

ALICE WONG: Hello dear friends! It's funny how during this coronavirus pandemic, so many people are discovering and taking advantage of accessible content and events that disabled people have been creating since forever. One example is the [Superfest Disability Film Festival](#), a festival organized by the Paul K. Longmore Institute on Disability at San Francisco State University. I'm a huge fan and believe it's the leader in making film festivals more accessible. Special shout out to Cathy Kudlick and Emily Smith Beitiks from the Institute for all of their hard work. Today I speak with Alex Locust and Karen Nakamura, two jury members for Superfest. Alex and Karen talk about what it's like to be on a jury, what it means to have a film festival that's radically inclusive and centered on disabled audiences, and how festivals like Superfest are advancing disability representation. Are you ready? [electronic beeping] Away we gooooo!

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

ALICE: Alex and Karen, thank you so much for being on my podcast today. I am delighted to talk with you both. Why don't we have you two introduce yourselves?

ALEX LOCUST: So, my name is Alex Locust. I use he/him/his pronouns. I refer to myself as a glamputee. [chuckles] I'm a counselor in San Francisco. I do community organizing and champion disability justice in all sorts of different ways, whether it's on the runway or on a film jury. And I do speaking engagements through either like workshop facilitation or offering consultation to different organizations, companies, communities who'd like to elevate their practices for including disabled folks and trying to help empower disabled folks to be a part of the conversation.

KAREN NAKAMURA: Hi, I'm Karen Nakamura. I use as she/hers pronouns. And I came to the Bay Area about three years ago to pick up the leadership of the Disability Studies cluster at UC Berkeley, where I'm Haas Endowed Chair in Disability Studies and a professor of Anthropology. I identify as having psychiatric and neurological disabilities. And super happy to be part of this vibrant community in the Bay Area, but also recognizing we're at a moment of a lot of changes in leadership and new generations coming up. And so, it's a particularly, I think, vital time for our community to get together and through mechanisms like what you have here, Alice.

ALICE: And I do feel really privileged that we're all part of this very large, very diverse disability community. And there's just so much kind of power and comfort and just culture that we're really

privileged to be a part of. And I think part of that is definitely the Superfest International Disability Film Festival.

[cool lounge music break]

What makes Superfest so unique

KAREN: There are many disability film festivals and many excellent disability film festivals around the country. But I think what differentiates Superfest is we're a film festival that's juried by people with disabilities. We understand our audience to be disabled people. And we see and try to encourage disabled filmmakers as much as possible to be part of that. And I think that's really our core mission. These are voices coming from within our community to our community. Of course, they reach a much broader audience than just our communities, but we really wanna center that experience. I think many disabled people have had the experience of watching film or television that has a disabled character and just not seeing ourselves there. And we want to see representations of us that really speak to our experiences.

ALICE: Thank you for that. How about you, Alex?

ALEX: Yeah. It means so much to me. I have been involved for the past three or four years, and to Karen's point, the structure of it, the spirit of centering disability is really refreshing. And I think, unique in particular to Superfest, you know, to have it be a disabled jury. And the in-person experience is really special. For me, it's a rare experience of disabled folks being able to come together organically around like a cultural experience, as opposed to meeting through the needs of like a service provider or having to come together because of, you know, a rally or a protest, which can be really beautiful organizing and community building. But it's just nice to come together and kind of like have fun [chuckles] and enjoy movies. And it's almost kinda like a reunion, you know. I feel like this year, particularly, it was just really fun to get to see some of the other jurors, given that they don't necessarily live in the Bay. So, it's kind of like this annual thing that I get to look forward to. It's one of my favorite times in the year.

In terms of when I facilitate workshops, I tell people, if you want to see the premier place for some of the best access that I've seen done in terms of multiple different access features being considered, you know, chemical-free policies, live captioning, you know, all of the films have audio descriptions offered, ASL interpreters, you know, the seats are set up so that they can be moved around so wheelchair riders can kind of sit wherever they want rather than just being relegated to one section. I think it just models how any kind of community organizing can be made more accessible and with access in mind from day one. So, I find that to be really another feature that makes Superfest particularly special.

The last thing that I wanna add is how Superfest, really to Karen's point about empowering disabled filmmakers, we've had winners where films are shot on like iPhones or iPads. There's like shoestring budget, like under \$10,000 category. And I think what that does is it says to people, you know, art is art, and you shouldn't need to have like a big studio or a big budget in order to participate and for your story or your vision to be celebrated and seen and shared. And I think given the financial disparities that many disabled folks experience feeling like, you know, we're not invited to be a part of the process, like filmmaking isn't typically made to be accessible. So, to put power in people's hands and say, listen, if you've got something beautiful that you wanna share, we wanna see it. And then have those things win really communicates to not only the disability community, but the mainstream, like we should be lifting up art regardless of the money behind it.

[cool lounge music break]

The Superfest jury

ALICE: So, how did you both get involved in being on the jury for Superfest?

KAREN: I think I was nominated by Cathy Kudlick. So, I've made two films in the community of people with psychiatric disabilities in Japan that I was working with a couple years ago. Those films never showed at Superfest. That was before I had known about it and known to submit. But because of those films, I was active in other film festivals where around visual anthropology. And I think when Cathy Kudlick heard about those skills, she thought that I might be an interesting person to add to the mix. And I'm just very honored to have been invited. And, you know, from jurying other festivals, both as a juror and an organizer, everything is different about Superfest. And I think that's one of the really moving things: that we change the basic principles on how we think about films and how we think about representation.

ALICE: And how many years have you been on the jury, if I may ask.

KAREN: I think I've been on for three years.

ALICE: Mmhmm. How about you, Alex?

ALEX: I went to San Francisco State, their graduate counseling program. They have a Clinical Rehab and Mental Health Counseling program, specializing in supporting people with disabilities. And through that program, I got connected to the Longmore Institute. And I can't remember if I started off as a graduate fellow. And then just in working with Emily Smith Beitiks and Cathy, they invited me to participate. Or maybe I volunteered. And I think just somehow getting linked with them, they recognized my voracious pop culture knowledge, and it's just kind of like a perfect match. And so, I started off as a student juror.

So, there's kind of two phases for Superfest. There's Phase 1 is a small group of student jurors kind of do like basically a paid internship. And we get together every week, and for like three hours, screen all the films that've been submitted to get all of the candidates down to the kind of final round for the Phase 2 jury. So, I had the pleasure of getting to screen like a 100-some films with other disabled students. And then that experience led me to Phase 2. It was really fun to get to kinda sink our teeth into it and really gain confidence in being more critical about those things.

[loungey-Bossa Nova music break]

ALICE: For people are unfamiliar with film festivals or juries, can you both describe the roles and responsibilities of being on a jury and the process of being on a jury for Superfest in particular?

KAREN: The first rule of juries is [laughing] what happens in the jury room, stays in the jury room!

ALEX: [laughs]

KAREN: It's just such a fantastic experience. We have these really candid discussions about films and about our own reactions to the films and sort of what it's triggering in us and how it reflects on the community. And so, there's many wonderful discussions that I wish we could share, but we can't.

So, basically, our task is to take maybe the 30 or so films that the round one jurors have selected and to try to narrow them down and curate them further. And I wanna really shout out just the sheer brilliance of what Cathy and Emily have done with using their undergrads for the round one jury. Because it builds such a competence and community in those undergraduates. I mean, they are going out, having really seen such a wide swath of films, and talking and thinking about what does it mean to select a film that's going to be shown to the community, right? So, we've seen so many films that just really depend on disability as inspiration porn or disability as just this sort of narrative prosthesis device that's used to indicate the bad guy or the good guy. And, you know, the students are taught how to pass through that, and that's so important. So, by the time they come to us, they're really great, meaty films that we engage in great discussions with.

ALEX: Yeah. I mean, having been a part of both Phase 1 and Phase 2, I completely echo what Karen is speaking to. The screening process of getting it to Phase 2, you know, [chuckles] we go through a lot. And much of it is really Phase 1 is just trying to get the pieces that are gonna spark the most interesting dialogue, right? And so, Phase 2 has the difficult job of now we start to whittle into what we want the narrative of that year's festival to be. And so, then you start to have to ask hard questions, right? Like maybe there are a lot of solid films, and certain representation is kind of heavier than others, so you have to start making these difficult decisions. If we have an overrepresentation in this area, we're not doing justice to the diversity of the disability community.

I love Superfest for its consistent dedication to international representation. So, we try really hard to make sure that we don't emphasize, you know, the U.S. or kind of like Eurocentric perspectives over under-represented global perspectives. You know, Superfest, I feel like, is like a guiding light of where we, the disability community, would like to see representation go. And so, it's about saying like, have we seen this before? What is this doing, you know? Is this telling a story that's happened already, or is this really unpacking something new and exciting? And sometimes that's new and sexy or new and funny, or sometimes it's, you know, very poignant or sad, but it does more things to unpack the intersections, right, around like queerness, different communities of color, different, sexual identities and things like that.

We all have our own specialties and areas of expertise and knowledge. And so, how do we both bring that into the fold and also challenge each other to say, like, where are our biases, or where are our areas of weakness that maybe we're not acknowledging? Which I always find really a huge source of growth for me is hearing from the other jurors' perspectives that, you know, just given my own experiences, like I wouldn't have considered how something could be triggering, or it could be actually really beneficial to see certain representation. Whereas I might've thought differently just on the first watch.

ALICE: Yeah. That's where things get really, really real, right? I was wondering if you could both describe the composition of the jury?

KAREN: You know, when I've organized a film festival, my usual thought is, oh, you know, I need to get people who make films some festivals are curated by all film studies scholars, so people who are wonks about analyzing film. There are some filmmakers in the jury. You know, I'm one of them, and Reid Davenport is another filmmaker. And we have Regan Brashear, who's a producer and filmmaker. So, we have that, but we also have a lot of people who aren't filmmakers. They recognize things from the perspective of the viewing audience. And that's core because oftentimes the non-film people will make these really profound statements about the film that totally over-weigh, you know, the film geeks who were looking at the production

qualities like, oh, my god. I wonder which rig they were using! That was really great. I really liked that. And then we'll get derailed, and a film that otherwise might've been included just because it just had such high production values, when pushed, it's like, yeah, actually, that wasn't the message that we're trying to send. And we have this great conversation.

ALEX: Yeah, I would just add too, just the different identities that are represented. I mean, from the disability perspective, having deafness, blindness, you know, I'm an amputee. People have identified as neurodivergent, you know, chronic illness, wheelchair riders, psychiatric disabilities, like all sorts of different experiences coming together in the way that we see representation, but also like physically experience the film. So, I think, you know, there are times where, for some of our blind jurors, even when they're being audio described live as we're watching, you know, some films are almost very reliant on visuals. And it can be kind of difficult for blind jurors to consume it in a way where it feels like they're getting a similar experience. You know, certain things that I, being a sighted person might not have been able to consider, because that's not my experience. So, it's not just about like who we want represented or the stories we want told, but again, thinking about access as an artistic practice. That's a really great aspect of like a diverse jury is that we're not just thinking about that. It's like if there are really intense sounds, or sometimes it's overstimulating or can be intense for some of our jurors. So, all of that helps to, again, deepen the process.

ALICE: Right. And I think diverse representation is so much more than a bunch of checkboxes.

ALEX: Mmhmm.

[loungy-Bossa Nova music break]

Media and cultural representation

ALICE: And I'd love to ask both of you what is important to you in terms of representation of disability in film and just also clearly culture, media.

ALEX: [laughs] So, I was thinking about this before the interview. And I was like, how long do I wait before I just [laughs] go into some of my agenda around representation? I think before Superfest, had a flavor of like the frustration that I experience with disability representation. And then Superfest providing me like these examples of what could be, right, what is out there, it just becomes even more shocking when I continue to see the same stories being told in really like flat, [chuckles] unoriginal ways. I identify as a queer, bi-racial amputee. And so, being like a man who's exploring my femme identity and exploring the complexities of those intersections, to consistently see disability told largely as a story of cis, straight, white, able-bodied men who become disabled through some kind of traumatic accident and then rediscover themselves through sports or falling in love with a woman [chuckles] is just really, you know, and also played by a non-disabled actor, and seeing them get rewarded for that, it just really, it's exhausting. And so, Superfest has just changed my life in seeing that, like, I guess what feels like sometimes in mainstream media, there's kind of like I refer to it as "gateway disabilities" or like these kind of stories or they're like, we will add one marginalized experience. And now we're pushing the envelope, right? So, it's kind of like stories that aren't really nuanced or exciting, you know, and it just doesn't do anything for me.

So, I mean, queerness and disability I find to be a very fabulous intersection and creates a lot of beautiful art. But I just love seeing things that make me wonder about like how disability generates beauty in life or is a part of someone's identity in a place of pride or like exploration of what that means to them, as opposed to this thing that they're trying to overcome or

overcompensate, which most times, either through inspiration porn or like these super-crippy kind of things, just feels like people are telling stories about how disability is an afterthought or something that we should kind of erase or like feel bad about.

ALICE: Thank you for that. I appreciate it. How about you, Karen?

KAREN: Something that Cathy Kudlick opens our jury sessions with, that she wants to really push us to have a film festival that's Disability 201. And by that, she means she wants to move us just beyond the sort of simple introduction to disability that many of us might've seen in other sorts of films that just sort of touch upon, oh, this is what it means to be blind. They use canes. Isn't that so incredible? You know, something really just really shallow. And how do we get into more complex issues, the complexity of people's lives, the lives that they live?

But another thing that I very much like is when we find films that also spur discussion within the community. You know, we are a very diverse community. We're a very diverse jury pool that represents that community. And often we have these just really fiery discussions about, you know, should we show this film? And half the jury will be like, you know, aw! This film is so triggering to me! And other people are like, we love it. And then we have this conversation about, well, what is it bringing up? How are we having this conversation? And oftentimes, we'll end with like this is exactly the conversation we wanna have after the film shows. You know, we need to have this conversation in the community.

One of the things I like about Superfest is that we make a real effort to try to get the filmmakers or the disabled actors to come and to join in, in conversations after the screenings. And so, the community gets this chance to talk about the film and what it's bringing for to them. And, you know, we try to plan for those moments. Sometimes they happen. Sometimes they happen in ways that we totally don't, could not have predicted, but even more wonderfully, you know. I think we all understand its sort of centrality in disability culture in the Bay Area, that we have this responsibility for fostering this, I think, really precious gift that was given us and using it to bring the community together, to celebrate disability films, but also have conversations that we need to have about issues that face our community. And I think often, we're very sort of, we're very polite to each other. And so, we're like, well, no, let's not stray into a conversation about how, for example, community members might have mixed feelings about the notion of cure. I mean, that is something that we don't talk too much about. But some of us have mixed feelings. And so, how do we wanna approach it? Can we talk? Can we talk about this in more complex ways? Because we are within a group of people within the community.

ALICE: Watching a film, whether it's a documentary or a feature film or short or animation, people really get another sense of possible. And usually the reason why I love going to film festivals is that you get to see independent films, and it just shows you kind of alternate ways of being and thinking in the world. And you know, I really do believe that people are moved and changed after attending events like Superfest.

ALEX: And if I can add to what Karen said, too. In that spirit of being moved and being in community and conversation, one of the things that I always appreciate about a lot of the films that win or are selected for Superfest feature multiple disabled people within the same film. And I find that to be, you know, often not the case in more mainstream depictions, where there's like one disabled person. [chuckles] And they're like a plot device for other people to be better through like learning to how treat disabled people.

ALICE: Yeah, they're usually the sidekick, right?

ALEX: Yeah. Yeah, the sidekick or like a tragic person who you know, there's that whole "better off dead" trope where, you know, somehow something tragic happens, or they take their own life. And then everybody learns to be better after because of this poignant experience. Whereas, you know, Superfest is showing films where disabled people, you know, either grow together, you know, are having sex with each other, are in conflict, are friends. Like I think that also demonstrates or models like disabled people don't exist in isolation. And seeing that in a community setting can kind of just reinforce this idea that this like cross-disability solidarity is what we should be striving for.

[jazzy lounge music break]

KAREN: We talk about how Superfest can change the community, how it's changed the jurors. One of the things that I don't think people realize is that it actually physically changes the films as well. So, we have oftentimes had a film come in, and it wasn't originally audio described. And we've said this is a great film, but it's not audio described. Will you add audio description? Some filmmakers have just done a very light audio description. You know, they add it to the existing film and provided access that way.

But we've also had a couple films where the directors have gotten that prompt back from us and just been totally moved and done essentially a re-mix of their film with audio description at the very core. And by doing it, made a really wonderful and incredible and more complex film that I think is more nuanced. And for the directors, it's been incredibly creative for them as well, because suddenly, we're giving them this new tool. It's like, hey, you've been thinking in terms of just sort of the visuality and maybe the sort of the narration track, but you've never really thought about what audio description can do. And I think those have been really, really powerful when the filmmakers add that to their vocabulary.

The second thing we do is we try to be very careful about the depictions of disabled people. And we're very sensitive to this notion of able-bodied actors playing disabled people. And so, we will often go back to the filmmakers and ask them, were the characters, especially for narrative films, were they portrayed by able-bodied or disabled characters? And I think that's often sometimes the first time that, especially mainstream filmmakers, have been asked that question. And we're problematizing it from the beginning. And so, I think that's important. And I think the fact that they recognize that we see that and we are thinking about that as a selection criteria for actors as well as the directors and producers. And so, you know, we start to get now films that have been crowdsourced from within the community. You know, the director and the producer are disabled. The actors or the people portrayed are disabled. And it's really very much generated from within disability communities. And I like to think that that's part of Superfest's sort of creation of this space in which those films can get celebrated and also where filmmakers can get the recognition for putting that effort in.

ALICE: When you kind of change one filmmaker's mind, they're gonna carry that on in their conversations with other filmmakers. And that this is where the baby steps happen. When you prioritize access, then it really starts to become standardized. There's so much potential there in terms of the influence of festivals like Superfest to the broader filmmaking world.

KAREN: Superfest is just, you know, we are still mostly a Bay Area phenomenon. But, you know, in the past two years, we've seen disability more prominent in a number of, you know, blockbuster films that are just absolutely horrible, right? The story line is the one Alex, described: someone's terminally ill, and an able-bodied person falls in love with them. And it's only through that love which only results in the disabled person dying, that the able-bodied person learns true love. Blah, blah, blah. Just absolutely horrible stories. But we've also seen

more representation of disabled people, especially through a bunch of TV series: *Speechless*, *Breaking Bad*. Disabled people just finally getting access. This is part of a movement.

And we just learned this week that Jim LeBrecht's *Crip Camp* is going to be opening at Sundance. This is going to be a major disability documentary film made by an all-disabled crew with support from the Obamas, finally throwing it wide open. And so, I really feel like we're on the cusp of this larger renaissance of disability culture, disability film. And I'm really hoping that, you know, Superfest, at one level can help promote, feed into the creation of communities that can then produce even more wonderful stories. 'Cause we have so many great stories within the community.

ALICE: Yeah, it's really just the tip of the iceberg.

[jazzy lounge music break]

ALEX: For me, Superfest just kind of gives me nourishment. Like every year, I know it's gonna be amazing, and it astounds me how much more amazing it is than I expected. And as I mentioned earlier, like how Superfest models access, you know, I appreciate, Alice, your work with Mia Mingus and Sandy Ho around "Access is Love" and trying to demonstrate support and care for the disability community at all levels of organizing and event hosting.

I think particularly, for me, like the idea of chairs that move around really just blew my mind where I'm like, oh, right. Like movie theaters, you can't move the seats. You know, I've even experienced this. I use crutches and can be mobile in terms of a space. But like when I go to concerts, I can only bring so many people with me into the quote-unquote "accessible" seating, right? And so, now my friend group has to be split up. They won't allow like if I come with like 15 people rolling deep, which I have—Superfest is that important, I always make sure I bring a lot of my community—like we have to get split up. Whereas Superfest, you kind of move the chairs to however you like. And so, now it's disabled people aren't separated from the people that matter to them. Or even it's acknowledging that like many disabled people can be in community, and it's not just that you have like one or two disabled people who are interested, so.

ALICE: Don't you realize, we're not allowed to have friends! We can only have a companion!

ALEX: [laughs] Yes, just one!

ALICE: You can only have one companion that's your helper!

ALEX: It's like a flight, right? you only get one free carry-on, and then you have to pay for everyone else.

ALICE: Right, right. Because they don't want us. They don't...they cannot believe that we have more than one friend or that we have more than one disabled friend who we wanna hang out with. UGH! How about you, Karen?

ALEX: [chuckles]

KAREN: I'm with Alex. I'm intensely proud of Superfest. And I think it is one of a kind. There's all these best practices around access, which I think Superfest has really honed to a very sharp point. And I wanna shout out to the Access Coordinator, Corbett O'Toole, for really making sure every time we host the Superfest that the access in the buildings that we screen at is not only the best that the building can do, but even more. Oftentimes she will physically change things so

that there's even more access than what the building had ever envisioned it to be. So, there's that. And then there's its centrality within the larger disability community. But at the same time, I recognize it's like geez. You know, we are so fortunate to have Superfest here in the Bay Area. And yes, Superfest does travel to other parts of California in these little mini-Superfests. But there's something very special about the two days that it's here.

It is selfish because I recognize, you know, when I was on the East Coast, there was nothing. I mean, part of the reason I came here is because this is the center of disability community and disability culture. And it is so much harder to find these conversations over East. There's a saying within sort of equity communities about the difference between inclusion and belonging. And, you know, many other festivals may try to strive at inclusion. So, they'll include one or two disability films that might have you know, disability as just an item. But what I really feel, and I think this is what we led with, is when I go to Superfest or when I step into the jury room, I feel like a belonging, you know?

ALEX: Mmhmm.

KAREN: That I am part of this community. And it has a ton of issues. You know, I don't go in thinking that it is necessarily a space where we all just agree.

ALEX: Mmhmm.

KAREN: But it is a safe space, in that I know that we disagree on some issues, but we are all together in a particular way. And we need to have these conversations. We need to know that we disagree. But at the end of the day, we all really love and respect each other. And that's what I feel both as a juror, in the days that we jury, and on the two days at the Superfest. It's like I just feel this communal love. And that's, I think, that sentiment is something that I wish we could find mechanisms for crips all across the U.S. and the world to also feel: how can you feel this feeling of radical inclusion and love, you know?

ALICE: As a person who's attended Superfest and moderated panels and just other ways of kind of tangentially supporting the festival, but every time I go, it feels like home.

ALEX: Mmhmm.

ALICE: I always mention it feels like a reunion of sorts, but it feels like home. And that really comes from a place of love and clearly, people who are centering us. It's so rare, and yet really incredibly special. And I am so full of gratitude for Superfest to be in my own backyard, but also the fact that you two are part of my community! So, Alex and Karen, thank you so much for being on my podcast tonight.

KAREN: Thank you so much, Alice. I really appreciate everything that you do.

ALEX: Yeah. Also, you know, just in gratitude and wanna give shout out: Cecile Poretz at the Contemporary Jewish Museum and Jennifer Sachs at [The LightHouse for the Blind](#) have been such integral support of that solidarity and creating that home, that oasis. So, I just wanted to make sure I thank them, too. [cool lounge music returns till the end] And you know, Karen as well. I just am so grateful the space that you're carving out. And the work that I do, I'm trying to emulate and always kind of help celebrate what you're doing and kind of continue the legacy. So, thank you.

KAREN: Aw. Group hug time.

ALICE: Yeah, love fest!

KAREN: [laughs]

ALEX: Hug! [laughs]

ALICE: Yeah, Superfest love fest!

Wrap-up

[hip hop]

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 Karen and Alex at my website.

The audio producer for this episode is Cheryl Green. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Thanks for listening! And see you on the Internets! Byeeee!