

Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 89: Museums

Guests: Amanda Cachia

Host: Alice Wong

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Introduction

[hip hop plays with radio static]

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

ALICE: Greetings, my friends! Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host, Alice Wong.

I love museums. I miss going to them but am glad there are so many museums with online exhibits and programming. Today we're talking about museums with [Amanda Cachia](#), an independent curator and critic from Sydney, Australia who is now based in the U.S. Her research focuses on modern and contemporary art; [curatorial studies and activism](#); [exhibition design and access](#); [decolonizing the museum](#); and the politics of embodied disability language in visual culture. You'll hear Amanda talk about her scholarship and work as a disabled curator, museum accessibility during this pandemic, how curators can make accessibility a part of their practices, and how technology can bring people closer to art in new ways. Are you ready? [electronic beeping] Away we go!

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

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

AMANDA: Thank you for inviting me.

ALICE: So, Amanda, tell us a little bit about yourself.

AMANDA: Well, I am based in San Diego, in southern California. I'm currently teaching Art History for a number of different campuses in the area, including Cal State Long Beach, Cal State San Marcos, and I was teaching at UCLA in their Disability Studies minor. Now I'm also teaching at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles. I am an independent curator. I love organizing art exhibitions in different places. And my curatorial practice revolves around contemporary disability art. I have a Ph.D. in Art History from UC San Diego, focusing on disability art as well. And I have a husband and almost two-year-old toddler at home. And trying to be active right now and turning my dissertation into a book.

Getting involved in art history

ALICE: Let's talk about why you're interested in art history, how did you get involved in that, and what you love about being a curator.

AMANDA: I've loved it since I was a little girl. I tried my hand at being an artist, but I was feeling like that wasn't my strength. But I loved working with artists, and I just found it so energizing to be around artistic talent, but also to be able to work with them to show off their work at its best. And that's why I decided to study art history, but then also to become a curator, because I felt like it was a very privileged position to be able to help artists be represented in the museum and to make their work shine on those gallery walls and to help them have conversations with other artworks in the room and other artists consequently. So, I've always found great joy in that, and I still do up until this day.

When I was, I think I was only 21 or 22, I decided to do my first Master's degree in Curatorial Studies, and that was in London at Goldsmiths. And when I was there, I decided to do an internship at the Tate, the Tate Modern. And that was pretty mind blowing as well, because now you're getting into the really, really big museums. And then shortly after I was in London doing my Master's, I went to New York City, and I did an internship at the Museum of Modern Art and just continuing to fall in love with all of these major collections. You know, art history is really just a history of us, our surroundings, our society, our civilization but as seen through art.

[chill music break]

Museums shifting due to the coronavirus pandemic

ALICE: You and I are talking on June, 2020, in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic. We've seen a lotta institutions such as museums and galleries really have to shift in the way they show their work. What are some of the things that you've noticed in terms of just the ways museums are responding to this pandemic, and in a way, opening up and being a little bit more accessible?

AMANDA: When I teach art classes, I make my students go to a museum on a field trip, because to me, seeing art in real life is so important. Of course, now they can't do that. Basically, these museums are developing these very comprehensive virtual tours. So, some of them already had that, actually. But then I feel like now, a lot of them are doing it because they have to; there's a greater need for their materials to be offered virtually. And that's going to be a huge benefit to everybody, and not just disabled folks who might struggle to get to museums physically. It's more accessible to students who might not be able to afford to get to a museum. I feel like it's more of an equalizer now having these virtual visits. And it's kind of unfortunate that a pandemic had to be the reason why museums suddenly shift their focus to the virtual world much more comprehensively.

Just last week, I was talking to an artist who was telling me that she did a virtual residency, an artist residency, and she identifies as disabled. Most of these artist residencies that are available are usually in very remote and peaceful locations. And that's good because it gives the artist a chance to really reflect and to take their time to make new work. But on the other hand, those locations are, most often, completely inaccessible. And so, she said she was so happy that she was able to mix with other artists and network and meet new people and have studio visits, but she could do it all online. So, there's another way that, all of a sudden, that things are becoming more accessible for folks.

And then of course, curating virtual exhibitions, there's been a massive explosion with that. I've curated shows virtually before in the past, and it's always been really enjoyable for me. But I think there's so much untapped potential.

[chill music gets bolder in a short music break]

Structural barriers and ideas for making museums more welcoming

ALICE: There's so many structural barriers that this is another way to kind of make museums for all. Which is like this movement about museums for all, because there is such a distance, and I don't know that "elitism" is the right term or not, but I feel like there's still a lotta people who don't feel welcome at museums.

AMANDA: I completely agree. And a bulk of students that I've taught over the last three, four years, most of them had never been to a museum before, an art museum before. A lot of them found it a struggle to get there for economic reasons or for lack of transportation. So, I've really had to think about accessibility from so many different perspectives, which has been really, really good for me.

And then to talk to them about how we shouldn't take the art history canon at face value, like there's alternative discourses. And of course, that's my work as a art historian considering disability, is how can we integrate disability into those discourses, into those art history textbooks so that students don't just have this sort of very limited, one-sided Western viewpoint of art?

ALICE: What kind of artists get to be in a major exhibit is also very much part of the problem. So, what can museums do to meet more welcoming and to really create a space that invites everyone?

AMANDA: Yeah, I think by having the curators develop exhibits that are more responsive to the community: consulting with community, inviting community to put on guest shows. I think some museums are better at doing that than others. Some museums are better at addressing the inequities of the past. There was a big story that I've just been reading about how the Guggenheim in New York only just invited a Black curator for the first time last year to guest curate a show about African-American art. And that was the first time in their 60+ year history that they had done that. So, you know, museums are admitting that there's inequities and they're starting to address those issues. But I think it's a conversation that's rife with conflict and sensitivity and hurt. A lot of people are hurt, and especially now in the environment that we're in. Many museums that I've had encounters with, their education departments are the cornerstone of this kind of work, reaching out to community and addressing the needs of community.

It's often funding-driven. I mean, I don't know if folks have heard about all of the cuts, unfortunately, at MoMA, that they cut a lot of their educators because of the coronavirus and having to shut the museum. But those folks were the first to go. And it's just sad because they're the ones that are doing all the groundwork, thinking about these communities, these folks that really find the museum most often really inhibiting and intimidating.

ALICE: Yeah. Thank you for that.

[bright music break]

How disability is framed through art by non-disabled people and Critical Disability Studies

ALICE: I'm assuming that most curators and historians and critics are not disabled. So, many times that's the lens that we're looking at, in terms of disability. So, what are some of the things that you've noticed in terms of how disability is framed through art?

AMANDA: A majority of the time we find that there is just a lack of disabled artists in general that are practicing because they weren't necessarily given the access to be able to practice. But

there are a lot of other minority groups that were not able to practice being artists either. Foremost in my mind right now is women. I mean, even women artists were not able to have access to careers as artists because they were having to be in the domestic sphere. We're still thinking about these various minority categories that have not had the ability to be able to access the arts for all kinds of reasons because of the patriarchy that we still live in.

I've looked at a number of older works over the years, and I've looked at contemporary work, especially, that sort of seeks to challenge those representations. Like when I teach an art history class, if we're looking at even something from ancient Egypt, for example, or ancient Rome, I'll be able to say to them, "Look, how has this disabled body in this painting been portrayed, or in this sculpture? What does the art history textbook say? What do the art historians say? And how can we look at that differently? Why is it that the disabled body is always sort of this pinnacle of the body that is not perfect, the body that's atypical, the body that's a freak? Why does this have to be the antithesis of perfection?"

And trying to introduce them to artists like Yinka Shonibare, for example, who's a British artist, and he's interested in challenging these kind of norms around how the disabled body has been represented through the Renaissance, just trying to get students to think of this canon a little differently. How do we look at this depiction of this disabled body differently? And so, I just remember feeling really frustrated that none of that discourse was present when I would go into a museum, and I felt like it needed, really needed to be challenged!

And also just that it seemed like a very simplified conversation that museums were having around access. I'm really interested in decolonizing the museum as part of my work. And what I mean by that is how can a museum think of—again, thinking outside of Western discourse—how can we think of a museum that actually has collections that represent people outside of the West and sort of tearing down these insider outsider binaries, for instance, or the West and the other? There's so many famous scholars that I can think of that have been really important to be able to help us challenge this and lots of other curators that are interested in this important work, too.

ALICE: Yeah. There's been a lot of work in Critical Disability Studies on representation and culture and just on bodyminds. And what are some ways that Critical Disability Studies can inform Art History and Museum Studies and vice versa?

AMANDA: I always turn to the scholars that've been most influential to me in this area, and that is Tobin Siebers. He published *Disability Aesthetics* in 2010. His argument was that no, disability is always already present in art history, and it's just a matter of the way that it's been trained. Disability aesthetics is present. Artists have long been drawn to its aesthetics and for different reasons. We have to argue that then it should be written into the art history textbooks, by art historians who identify as disabled with a disabled voice, so that our perspective can be interwoven into that.

And also the work of Ann Millett-Gallant has been really, really influential to me. She wrote also a book in 2012, I think it was, called *The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art*. And she did some really groundbreaking studies of different works of art in the history of art and how disability has been tied into them and the way that it's been received. And these are scholars that identify as disabled. And sadly, Tobin Siebers is no longer with us. But I think that's why these scholars have been so important, 'cause they really bring a new voice that we hadn't heard before or seen before in art history.

[bright music break]

Curating Access: Global Exhibitions and Creative Accommodation

ALICE: You recently released a call for proposals for an edited volume titled *Curating Access: Global Exhibitions and Creative Accommodation*. Can you tell me more about this edited volume and your involvement in it?

AMANDA: I've been working on this idea of curating access for almost 10 years now, and I really was inspired by a residency that I did, I think it was 2011 or 2012, organized by a number of the UCs. And there were some really prominent disabled scholars at this residency. And there was a group of curators and young scholars and artists there. And we were all talking about this idea that access must be considered first and foremost when we're organizing an exhibition, and that often access is considered as an afterthought. Unfortunately, it still is today, even though maybe now, post-coronavirus, things will be a little different. But this idea of that maybe the curator could actually approach the idea of access as a part of the practice, that it can actually be a really exciting and very complex and intellectual activity. That a curator could have conversations with artists about access: like how do we look at the subject matter of audio description, and how can that be part of an artist's practice? Or how can we make this exhibit more accessible for wheelchair users or those of short stature and children as well, actually? Or how can we make Braille or any other kind of signage in the exhibition, how can we think of that creatively and differently?

And I really wanted to bring a book together that was going to look at practitioners from all over the world that were embracing these ideas. I just wanted to put out a call and see, well, who in the world is embracing these ideas and putting access first and foremost? And there's a few people that I can think of already that are doing that. Bojana Coklyat and Shannon Finnegan are two such amazing New York-based artists that are working together on this practice where they go around giving workshops about Audio Description, and that is their art practice. I've actually invited them to contribute to the book. So, I'm really, really excited. I spent most of my time in isolation just interviewing artists, especially artists in New York, actually. People are really doing important work, and I think it just needs to be acknowledged in this form.

ALICE: I'm a fan of Shannon Finnegan's work, and she was on my podcast earlier. And I just love the idea that she her co-partner, it's about this idea of image descriptions or alt text as a form of poetry. Because so that people think of it as like, ugh! I have to write this because of access, rather than seeing it as a creative opportunity. And I think that really flips the idea of access.

AMANDA: Yes. And that reminds me of a show that I organized in San Diego, actually, three or four years ago. And I invited all the artists in that exhibition to develop their own image descriptions. And most of the time, the artists had never done that before. And some of them said to me, "Wow, that was just like poetry for me. That was so much fun. And it gave me more insight into my art and my practice and thinking about my audience." I loved that. I was really happy that some of them really embraced it and turned it into more of an activity of writing and language and so on. And sort of on the next level to that, I actually also had conversations with some of these artists. And I'll give you an example.

Some of the artists submitted videos or films. And I said to them, "How are you going to consider your audience in terms of access for these works?" So, there was one artist who had given a performance in this video, and in the performance she had put on this very, very elaborate mask and this big headpiece. And it was made from different kinds of bits of found materials. And so, she gave me these materials, these found materials, that constituted her mask, and we put it on a pedestal in the gallery. You could touch the materials that you could

see on the screen in front of you that the artist was using. And you could also hear it because it was like all of this crunchy paper. So, it became a very multi-sensorial experience. So, I really do believe that's another access point: thinking about the sensorium on multiple registers.

ALICE: Yeah, 'cause it does feel like, at least art is very much centered on the visual.

AMANDA: Yes.

ALICE: And that really leaves out so many people. Because much of this art is behind glass or affixed to walls. And there is this kind of tension, I think, among museums and curators to have visitors touch actual art because the art is precious. Art is delicate. Art is, you don't wanna destroy the value! There's a lot of different kinds of concerns. But I also see a lot of exciting creative ways to really give different ways of sensing the art.

AMANDA: Yes, I completely agree.

[bright music break]

Being more inclusive and not making in-person the default ideal experience

ALICE: There's still this kind of belief that's perpetuated that the best way to experience art is to be in that space and to see it. And I feel like sometimes that's seen as the default ideal experience. For some people, virtual is the only way they're gonna be able to see museums. And for people to keep saying that, "No, to really experience this art, you have to be right in front of it," what are some ways that you think would be helpful to be more inclusive, I guess?

AMANDA: I always get excited when I tell my students, "Let's go to a museum together!" And I love going. But I totally think that the alternative to that is just as good, because I've discovered that there are these incredible resources online for art history textbooks. And that what you can do with these textbooks is zoom in to these images. And of course, all of these textbooks are also screen reader-friendly, which I love. I think that's so important. And also, that you can zoom in to the artworks in a way that you would never be able to do with a real-life artwork. You can get up close into the detail of the features of an oil painting from the 16th century or something. They have these interactive maps, and they use Google Maps. And you can click and figure out well, where does this ancient object come from in the world? And it will tell you exactly where in the world it comes from.

So, I just love that there's all these ways that the online world, the virtual world, can actually give you more information that is much more interactive. Rather than just going to a museum and sitting placidly in front of the object. [laughs] That's not to take away, again, from the excitement of seeing a real Picasso in real life or something, but that the online does offer a lot more information where the person that is viewing can actually engage with the keyboard and learning more about the work. And you can hear, listen. There's audio that actually gives you that information. And true, that you can do that in a museum, too, with your audio guides. But you could actually make it even more comprehensive online. This is just, for me, a starting point. I think there's so many other things that can be done with using the online platform for art history textbooks.

ALICE: Yeah!

[chill music break]

Amanda's dissertation

ALICE: I wanna hear a little bit about your dissertation. What are your plans, and what is your dissertation about? What is that like in terms of trying to repurpose it and package it into a book?

AMANDA: Yeah, I'm trying to just focus on what I'm calling the language of contemporary disability art and how this language is being sort of interpreted by contemporary disabled artists through different semiotic codes. The person that I'm thinking about who's really influencing me right now is Amanda Baggs, who was an autistic artist who sadly passed away very recently, a few months ago. And I just loved the work that Amanda did trying to translate, through typewritten text, the experience of embodiment. And I think that it was so profound. And I loved this jumping around of different mediums and jumping around of different semiotic codes from language to text, from language into image, from sound into image. I think that the work of contemporary artists is really profound for that reason: because they are trying to communicate something to us about their lived experiences that we might otherwise find really foreign. And what they're doing is really palatable, in my mind, but also exciting and enlightening.

And I've been working with some of the artists that I plan to write about. I've been working with them as a curator for, again, the last 8 to 10 years. And so, at this point, they're my friends. And so, I feel really happy about being able to, again, promote their work and think about it, reflect on it in ways that I hope will really make an impact in again, in art history and how art historians value the work of disability, and that we're not just there as props for considering the antithesis of perfection. You know, that there is so much more complexity to that.

ALICE: Yeah, we're more than just a metaphor.

AMANDA: Exactly. Yeah, exactly. And also to build on the great work of Tobin Siebers and Ann Millett-Gallant and so many other scholars. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson is another one who has greatly impacted my work. And I really hope that I can bring something to the table with these books.

[chill music break]

Semiotic codes

ALICE: You mentioned semiotic codes and sensorium. Could you describe what those mean?

AMANDA: Yeah, sure. I mean, it's this idea of a translation from one medium into another. I mean, this is exactly what we're talking about with image description. So, we're looking at an image, but it's being translated into a text. Or you might have a translation of a film, but you're translating it through a painting. Or you might have a musical score, and that musical score is also translated then into a dance. And there's all this kind of politics wrapped up in that, because if you're talking about translation—especially when you're thinking about something like American Sign Language—when American Sign Language is translated into word or into voice, rather, what is lost or what is gained when those translations take place? And so, what I'm sort of getting at is that contemporary art is, by disabled artists, is a translation of those embodied experiences, and those embodied experiences deserve to have their own merit, their own credibility. Because it's not just like an offshoot of the original. Actually, there is something really profound to be said about those translations.

And what I'm trying to get at too in my book is that the entire history of art is one translation, because English is actually the language that's predominantly used for a Western notion of art

history. And so, translation is really important. And so, that means that there's already the sort of issues of dominant discourse, like what's considered dominant and what's considered sub-altern when we talk about whose histories get to be said? And why is it that English has to be the predominant language? Why isn't it other languages that take that dominance or predominance? So, I'm just saying that the entire history, really, of art itself is already bound up in power and privilege, and what are the ethics of that? That's kind of like the wider perspective, the macro perspective. And then from a micro viewpoint, I'm looking at disabled art and how these translations can really provide new pathways for interpreting art in general.

ALICE: There is so much to kind of flesh and to really just explore. And I think there's so much that non-disabled artists and non-disabled people in the art world can really learn from disabled artists. So, I feel like this is just, again, the tip of the iceberg. This scholarship is so needed, and there needs to be more of it. So, thank you for sharing it with me.

AMANDA: Yeah, sure. Thanks for inviting me. I've really enjoyed our conversation.

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 more info about Amanda on my website.

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Thanks for listening, and see YOU on the Internets! Byeeeee!

♪ rocket to the blast off
stop drop dance off ♪