

Dependency and Improvisation: A Conversation with Park McArthur

Amalle Dublon and Constantina Zavitsanos

Amalle Dublon, Constantina Zavitsanos, and Park McArthur share notes about access, thickness and gain, and site and dependency in relation to McArthur's recent exhibition Projects 195: Park McArthur at MoMA.

AMALLE DUBLON:

Can we talk about a work in the exhibition titled *PARA-SITES* (2018)? This is an audio piece that visually describes the gallery and artworks in the show, as well as places that are off-site and imaginary. *PARA-SITES* draws on the format of MoMA Audio's numbered audio stops. But the aim is not to lead the visitor around the gallery, it's to provide description.

Museum audio guides are necessarily site specific, but disability messes with the idea of site specificity, because it's so hard to get to the event, get into the space, etc., especially in New York. So I appreciate not only that you used MoMA's existing framework of hosting recorded visual descriptions and transcripts online, but also that this work undercuts any singular "specificity" to be gained by coming to the museum. And then there's the off-site places that the audio guide describes: an existing sales office for the luxury condo tower going up above the museum expansion, and a "care building" you've been imagining for a long time. There, the visual description isn't creating access to something that separately exists in the gallery—access is the material and form of the artwork.

The displacement that museums enact occurs through collecting—taking, valuing, and hoarding. Your work instead effects a displacement into the otherwise "supplementary" or secondary space of access through description. It says, "You don't need to come here." The form of the work is literally JOMO (joy of missing out), which you and Tina have written about.¹ But it also offers up as its material the circuitousness and layered mediation of access, which often involves figuring out the extra winding route through the side entrance, for example, through the kitchen, break room, or storage area; or taking the freight elevator to your classroom or office; or moving through blurry or glitchy transcription, description, or live stream—routes and spaces that are supposedly procedural, but that are always improvisatory. That choreography or mediation adds a lot of thickness and delicacy to the artwork or event; it augments and contextualizes it in a way that the front entrance doesn't.

PARK MCARTHUR:

You're helping me think about sites of dependency.

Figuring out together with a person or people who are providing access often means running temporary interference to rules of security, business, and customer service that mediate kitchens, break rooms, and storage areas as work sites. Tina's called this the backstage pass.

CONSTANTINA ZAVITSANOS:

Yeah, this service behind the scenes of what is shown to an audience or "the" public. It's a nonpublic-facing public: it's backstage work and rest space, behind the music, distinct from a waiting room or a lobby. It's a very important entrance, but it's not the one designated VIP. Disability and labor are often falsely separated. Aside from the obvious fact that disabled people are workers and workers are disabled, and that both labor and disability are spatially regulated and relegated, we also make these spatial and social passages through the institution's backside.

PM: And that makes me wonder about how to talk about site specificity in terms of dependency. Not site specificity requiring a privatized relationship between an artwork and "where" it's placed (like the specificity of site described by Richard Serra), or the discursive site as the place the artwork resides, but artworks whose dependencies are the sites of artmaking and participation. In *Projects 195* I tried keeping some of the artworks' forms inextricably tied to the materials and mediums that they are normatively rendered in across a multiplicity of sites. For example, another artwork in the exhibition, titled *Is this an investment, pied-à-terre, or primary residence?* (2018, ● 338), is a piece which is essentially a graphics logo that spreads out—across the exhibition brochure, the gallery wall, the MoMA Audio as a visual description of the aforementioned wall painting, and online as a high-resolution digital rendering. Since it is an artwork taking the form of a museum graphic, the piece's content may appear to be any number of interrelated topics—e.g., the exhibition series' numbering system, the gallery space, the museum, the graphic's design and colors, or the work of the museum staff who made the digital file and/or the wall painting, just to name a few. But also, to me, the piece is about trying to think of dependency and site specificity without being fixed

(fixed as in holding fast to a stable form; the piece tries to make a home out of each format listed above so that it is no longer at home in any of them). I got excited about working on an artwork while working on a museum exhibition that did not isolate the museum as the single site of reception.

The three of us have talked about biases in treating aesthetic experience as somehow separable from, rather than constituted by, access needs, as if access were a filter

applied to an extant image. Our class at The New School taught me about deep fried memes—deep frying a digital image through compound applications and repetition produces gains in affect and flavor—filters applied to an image heighten but also hide things. Recently, I was wondering about deep fried access: access shared by disabled people, constitutive

of what we want and need, rather than mediated by an image of access that provides none. Could a deep fried golden brown access that's tender on the inside and crispy on the outside offer a crispiness that is in direct tension with the crispness and clarity of the image of access itself?

I think about artworks like...your *April 4, 1980* (2018), Carolyn Lazard's *A Recipe for Disaster* (2018), and Jordan Lord's *After...After...(Access)* (2018) when thinking about forms and materials of access. *PARA-SITES* follows the ways made by these pieces. Although these artworks attend to the auditory and visual frames of experimental cinema, instructional video, and visual art in interrelated yet distinctly different ways, they each help me understand how much there is to be gained. As one example, I experienced *After...After...(Access)* in a film festival setting, and at the end of Jordan's film I felt this *whoosh* of longing for audio description and open captioning to be part of my everyday movie experiences in ways that Jordan's artwork narratively, formally, materially provides. Amalle, you've described noticing people falling in love with disability through access means and needs.

AD: With CART (communication access real-time translation), or live captioning, everyone always has this poetry moment, [when] they're, like, "The CART or the captioning is writing poetry!" because of the variability and error of live transcription. That kind of variability and error is one of the ways that people fall in love with disability as improvisation.

Access is sometimes regarded as this kind of ungainly addition to the work meant to make up for a perceptual "deficit." It may be a translation, as in a displacement, but it's also an addition, which makes the form bulkier, and then that bulkiness violates the imagined elegance and completeness of the artwork's form or concept. Access is often bemoaned as burdensome standardization, but it's

actually always improvisatory. Because improvisation is also this operation of taking a "given" artwork or pattern and elaborating it, and access is a similar distension, bulking up, or swelling of the artwork. It is necessarily choral. What is understood as a decay or delay of the artwork is actually its increase or growth. It makes the artwork fatter, thicker, slower, and richer. In *PARA-SITES* that buildup is more of a kind of elongation that reaches into those off-site and imaginary spaces.

PM: Yeah, and the format is also sort of elongated in that the museum's ideal audio description length with [regard] to making the descriptions accessible is around a minute, I think, and most of these are way over that, with the longest one,  3422, being nine minutes.

CZ: What's cool about Park's audio piece, and I mean this sonically, is the gain, or grain it gives the site of the show. There's a resonant thickness beyond the sound image itself, even if it goes unheard, because the piece moves the ground (not the way bass does, not haptically per se), but like it actually resituates the ground these works must arrive through by destabilizing the ideal that form must arrive through material routes. *PARA-SITES* resites the works it describes, while still functionally citing them, and then it goes just a little further to inscribe itself as a work; it becomes the material ground for the show and displaces the museum from occupying or abdicating that position until it's unrendered one of every possible positions in a field of undifferentiated noise. Everything scales from here. The access is present as a primary material beyond any one static form; it's like this specifically informal letter to access and as artwork that doesn't belie function for aesthetic. And she just does this for the love.

AD: That gain is a thickness that people inevitably fall in love with, because they become involved with the means of getting around, or communicating, and the poetry or choreography of that means. That thickness slows them down. Pretty much every love song and every sex song are about disability and dependency. Call the doctor, don't call the doctor, I get so weak in the knees, I can hardly speak. How people then treat that debt of love and desire is pretty much everything.

PM: Can artworks be debts of love?

PARA-SITES connected me back to my 2009 MFA thesis show, called *I owe you the end of the world*, which included color pencil drawings of a dream I had of my friend Kathleen Hudspeth and me on an iceberg floating past all of the world's museums, which had burned down. There was the end of everything, and it was super peaceful and awesome. In an adjacent gallery to [the one holding] these drawings were text pieces that each began "I owe you" and then described something—a poem, a sculpture, a painting—and what the form might do or be made of, e.g., "I owe you a mighty quiet sculpture...one that sounds



Find each audio segment referenced by number at: [https://www.moma.org/ audio/playlist/55](https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/55)

like walking your fingers across a table like legs. One that tastes like whole fat yogurt....” I called these artworks debt pieces because they reminded me of IOU notes for artworks I couldn’t “make” but wanted to. While working on *PARASITES* I felt close to these debt pieces—both because I was trying to think about what flavorful descriptions might be, and also because, as has been mentioned, one of the descriptions is sited in our imagination (● 343, which describes the care building). There is also a model of the care building, *STUDIO/HOME* (2018), made out of stainless steel, a material that has lots of uses, but is often found in hospitals, kitchens, and as part of outdoor infrastructure.

AD: You’ve been thinking about the care building for a long time—since your first show at Essex Street (*During the month of August ESSEX STREET will be closed*), in 2013, or before. Some of these works have pointed to or speculated about 1918 First Avenue, the former nurses’ residence and training school for Metropolitan Hospital, as a fantasy site for the care building. One of my favorite things in the recorded description of the care building is the way you imagined the bathroom, and specifically the tub.

The bathrooms join an enclosed area and toilet room with a larger wet room. The wet room features a hand-held shower and built-in bench with an embedded call button and small speaker that can automatically dial a series of chosen phone numbers when pressed. Near the bench are stainless steel grab bars. The entire room (except for the ceiling) is covered in smooth anti-slip tile. Along the room’s widest wall a deep soaking tub is enshrouded in the same tile. The tub’s wide outer rim acts as an additional bench and transfer seat. (● 343)

PM: I’m usually with another person in the bathroom, and I wanted it—the bathroom, but also the tub—to be comfortable for more than one person to be inside. But the possibility of being alone and needing to reach someone—someone you want to get in touch with—is something that happens in bathrooms too, so there is a call button, which should have a texting capacity! I love dreaming about large tubs. The care building both exists in this speculative zone of shower thought(s)—a kind of common fantasy, a steam dream and castle in the air, that is spread across so many people and places. The “audio stop” is a way to hang out on the tub’s imagined transfer seat while we’re in bed at home, or sitting on a museum bench. That segment of the piece ends with, “today, many of this building’s features are dispersed and shared among multiple living spaces, places, and homes...,” and the fantasy of our realities, or the reality of our fantasies, is something I like soaking in.

This exchange has been edited and amplified for publication.

Notes:

1. Park McArthur and Constantina Zavitsanos, “The Guild of the Brave Poor Things,” in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, edited by Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 235–254. 236.