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Scenes of Access, Politics of Difference

Pujan Karambeigi

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Abstract

Since the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, museum reformers have struggled to comply with the federal codes for accessibility. This essay accounts for the ambitions and limitations of these debates around access in the museum that were caught in the double bind between public expectation and private market forces, ultimately giving rise to a particular type of bottom-up reform organized around parametric gradients and attitudinal shifts. It does so by juxtaposing manuals for museum educators from the

1990s with artworks by New York City-based artists

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McArthur who all worked with the incorporation of

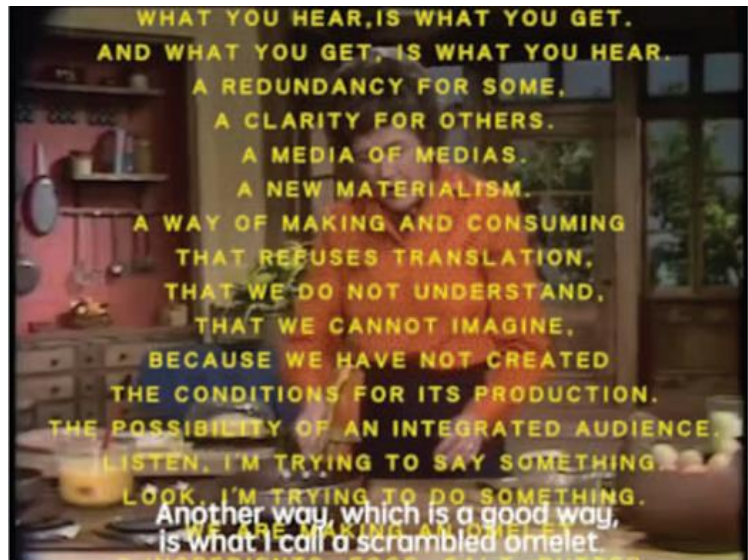
access into their artistic practice during the 2010s. The essay argues that these artistic practices force us to decouple the teaching of access from its narrow focus on shifting individual attitudes and instead belabor the form and content of stories about structural conditions.

Keywords: Access, allegory, Americans with Disabilities Act,

attitudinal shift, contemporary art, mobility, museum education, parametric design, reading exercise, sensorial translation

There was widespread frustration when, two decades after the groundbreaking Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) had been passed in 1990, the implementation of access by museums and other institutions still seemed to be stalling. In an often-quoted passage from 2010, Marcus Weisen articulated the frustration in this way: “Billions have been spent in recent years on new museums, major extensions and refurbishments across the globe, with little or no regard paid to providing a shared experience of the collections for disabled people. The cumulative effect is discrimination on a grand scale against disabled people.”¹ Parallel to this perception of institutional failure to reform the museum experience for disabled people, artists increasingly started to incorporate into their practice the problem of access – understood as an examination of the barriers preventing disenfranchised people from getting their proper share of resources and participating in civic and economic life.² In a recent article on the work of Park McArthur, art historian Colby Chamberlain has claimed that this incorporation of the problem of access into art bears witness to “the work of art in the age of its technological *accessibility*.”³ The historical avant-garde's trope of “dispelling the myth of autonomy,” and the trope's neo-avant-garde reformulation – critiquing “the illusion of a stable, coherent self” – is here reborn

under the guise of deconstructing the prejudice of ableism.⁴



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Carolyn Lazard. Still from *A Recipe for Disaster*, 2018. HD video, 29 minutes.

Julia Child holds a pan over a stove in a rustic pink and beige kitchen. She is a white woman with short curly brown hair. She wears an orange button down shirt with a black apron. On the counter is a bowl of eggs and a glass container of whisked eggs. Behind her is a wall of kitchen utensils. Behind her is also a doorway leading into a courtyard with plants. On top of this image, aligned to the center of the frame is a block of yellow sans-serif text. It reads, "WHAT YOU HEAR, IS WHAT YOU GET. AND WHAT YOU GET, IS WHAT YOU HEAR. A REDUNDANCY FOR SOME, A CLARITY FOR OTHERS. A MEDIA OF MEDIAS. A NEW

MATERIALISM. A WAY OF MAKING AND CONSUMING THAT REFUSES TRANSLATION. THAT WE CANNOT IMAGINE, BECAUSE WE HAVE NOT CREATED THE CONDITIONS FOR ITS PRODUCTION. THE POSSIBILITY OF AN INTEGRATED AUDIENCE. LISTEN, I'M TRYING TO SAY SOMETHING. LOOK, I'M TRYING TO DO SOMETHING. WE ARE MAKING AN OMELET.” Layered on to f this text is a white subtitle at the bottom of the frame that reads, “Another way, which is a good way, is what I call a scrambled omelet.”

Image courtesy of the artist and Maxwell Graham/Essex Street, New York.

In the following discussion, I will examine artworks and exhibitions by New York City-based artists who all worked with the incorporation of access into their artistic practice during the 2010s, highlighting the close and somewhat tense relationship between art and 1990s-style reformist museum education. I will start by describing how artists have adopted “sensorial translations” initially conceived by museum reformers in order to make museums more accessible and to bring about an educational encounter with their audience. In a second step, I will analyze how museum education manuals published in the aftermath of the ADA, whose goal was to promote accessibility and code compliance, may be viewed as a foil for the art practices I am concerned with in this article. In a third and final step, I will look at the way in which, in 2011, the education department at the Museum of Modern Art in

New York City began a series of collaborations with artists to facilitate what it called an “attitudinal shift” among staffers and audience. Focusing on one of these collaborations – with the artist Park McArthur in an exhibition entitled *Projects 195: Park McArthur* (2018-19) – I question the effectiveness of this shift, resting as it does on the individualization and privatization of accessibility.

SENSORIAL TRANSLATION

One of the major artistic strategies for incorporating access into art consists in expanding the viewer's sensorial choices. A case in point is Carolyn Lazard's video *A Recipe for Disaster* (2018), which is based on a 1963 episode of Julia Child's famous cooking show in which the TV star teaches her mass audience to make an omelet. Lazard adds a voiceover and white subtitles to Child's episode, transcribing the visual content into spoken words and written text, thus making sure that each message is communicated over two sensorial channels simultaneously. After roughly two minutes, a second voice joins in, reading a text that scrolls slowly, in yellow, over the image of Child preparing the omelet. This text contains short propositions about what the video might be trying to do, ranging from more abstract sentences like “This set of actions is a mirror” to designating Child's show as “making French food accessible to the masses.” The omelet, itself an allegory of integration, of synthesizing different

substances into unity, is here turned into an image of the ambition to translate one sensorial channel into another: neither channel contradicts the other, nor do the two create an unintelligible cacophony, but rather, they support and reinforce each other within this newfound unity.

The work that Lazard invokes and simultaneously rebukes in *A Recipe for Disaster* is Martha Rosler's canonical *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), a work that in its turn parodies a 1963 episode of Child's TV show, debunking Child's complicity in caging women within the domestic space. Rosler's video progresses from A to Z, with the artist's deadpan voice combining each letter with a kitchen utensil that she picks up as if it were a weapon. This staging of a (feminist) struggle – kitchen utensils turned into weapons to fend off patriarchy – is transposed onto the relation between text and image, with the neutral enumeration of letters and words that one hears clearly contradicting the violent and aggressive gesturing that one sees.

The contradiction between word and image as a way to emphasize representation as a form of violence was central to Rosler's practice. As such, it was part of a larger effort to formulate a kind of artistic pedagogy whose ambition was famously spelled out in the early 1980s by Benjamin Buchloh and others.⁵ The guiding principle of this pedagogy, according to Buchloh, was to increase the differences between image and text, or

sign and referent, so that they would create a “persistent sense of contradictions ... a spectacle of contradictions and inconsistencies.”⁶ Signs would thus “float randomly like amoebas,” allowing artists to establish “the hieroglyphs for the new reading lessons.”⁷ These “reading lessons” were thought to infuse visitors with self-doubt, shattering their sense of self, estranging them from reality, and allowing them to construct a new subject from scratch, only now freed from all prejudice.

By contrast, Lazard's *A Recipe for Disaster* does not denounce Child's mass pedagogy, nor does it pit, as Rosler does, one sensorial channel against another. As Lazard writes,

THE POSSIBILITY OF AN INTEGRATED
AUDIENCE.

LISTEN, I'M TRYING TO SAY SOMETHING.

LOOK, I'M TRYING TO DO SOMETHING.

WE ARE MAKING AN OMELET.

3 INGREDIENTS. EGGS. SALT. BUTTER.

3 MATERIALS. IMAGE. SOUND. TEXT.

NO MORE INTERVENTIONS AS THE
CONDITIONS OF ACCESS.⁸

In other words, the idea here is not to exacerbate the gap between channels, as is the case with Buchloh, whose approach Lazard allows us to understand as being predicated on a normative subject capable of perceiving several channels simultaneously. The mirroring of image, sound, and text in *A Recipe for Disaster* furthermore inverts the allegorical pedagogy that still dominates Rosler's work, striving to create a form of communication less dependent on the receiver's sensorial capabilities.

A similar goal is pursued in Jordan Lord's short film *After ... After ... (Access)* (2018), a work that uses text as a way to reduce the ambiguity of images to a minimum. The film's plot goes something like this: After realizing that they need heart surgery, Lord decides to make a film about the operation. The hospital, however, demands an insurance policy for two to five million dollars in order to permit filming. After various attempts, Lord eventually succumbs, with a twist, by replacing images of the surgery with verbal narrative that relates how friends and family helped Lord get through this difficult time, by way of "care packages" and other forms of support. In this way, the fact that Lord was not able to show the inside of their body due to the restrictions placed on filming by the hospital becomes the starting point for narrating the external human relations that sustain Lord's self.⁹ The film translates each image into spoken and written text that describes the action and its context, sometimes even reaching

beyond what can (not) be seen. For instance, the opening scene of the video depicts a light-skinned body part, the margins of a sky-blue apparel, as well as a bush of hair taking up the right top corner of the screen. Which and whose part of the body are we looking at? Does the hair belong to the same body? What are the red dots on the skin supposed to be evidence for? The voiceover immediately rushes to clarify the defamiliarized image: We are looking at Lord's own neck, the hair being part of a beard, thus reducing the image's ambiguity by employing the perspective of the authorial narrator. In this instance, translating the image into spoken and written text serves to regulate the image's possible excesses.



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Jordan Lord. Still from *After... After...* (Access), 2018. HD video, 15 minutes.

A light-skinned neck, the top of a blue collar, and part of a bushy beard take up the center of the image. The greyish background, visible in the top

left and bottom right corners is blurry.

Image courtesy of the artist.

Meanwhile, open captions and voiceover redistribute the power dynamic between frame and form, visuality and intelligibility. Indeed, critics have praised Lord's inclusion of captions and voiceover as a form of self-reflexivity: "These elements perform not as secondary or supplementary prostheses but as collaborative agents in Lord's documentary style," Kaegan Sparks has written.¹⁰ However, if this seems like a move taken from the modernist playbook, that argument ultimately obscures the function that speech and reading have in Lord's work. Rather than staging an instance of modernist self-reflexivity – mining the ontology of the art object, exposing specificities of the medium, or deconstructing the viewer – *After... After... (Access)* creates an image-text conglomerate that focuses on mediating, indeed containing, the unity of the self. Although there is a residue of modernism inscribed into the film, Lord's project must be read alongside art historical rather than artistic strategies.

A case in point is the way one of the pioneers of art history, Heinrich Wölfflin, used the verbalization of images as a pedagogical tool designed to contain the excesses of the image that threatened to disperse the unity of the self. Using slide projectors in his darkened lecture theaters, Wölfflin was an early proponent of using the voice to codify formal analysis according to a

set of rules, laying the foundations for art historical training. As Zeynep Çelik Alexander describes in her *Kinaesthetic Knowing* (2017), this “uniquely modern combination of the inner voice and the art of ekphrasis” worked “to slow this subject's sensorium down so that it could be restored to an imaginary state of unity.”¹¹ Far from being peripheral, this was one of the fundamental “techniques of *Bildung*” that established Wölfflin's epistemological ambitions.¹² Similarly, Lord's use of spoken and written text in *After ... After ...* (Access) verbalizes images whenever the latter risk succumbing to ambiguity. This is best illustrated by the film's opening scene, in which the defamiliarized depiction of Lord's neck is used to emphasize the voiceover's potential to rectify visual ambiguity.

However, unlike for Wölfflin, the threat of dispersal here doesn't come from the image's excessive power. The open captions and voiceover of *After ... After...* (Access) compensate for an image's potential lack of communicative power. Lord's point is that to rely on visual communication alone may result in the user/visitor/reader not comprehending the message inscribed in the images – which would ultimately sabotage any attempt to assemble the self as a kind of open unity. Visual transcription as a technology thus has a dual function in Lord's film: first, it functions to bridge differences within the audience's perceptual capabilities; second, it makes the messages that are being communicated more impervious to that same

audience.

In Lazard and Lord's films, access is synonymous with a specific form of communication, one that doesn't pit sensorial channels against each other but tests different ways of bringing them closer to each other, in an effort to construct a unity of the self that is constantly threatened with collapse.

EDUCATIONAL ENCOUNTERS

From the 1990s on – parallel to sensorial translations like the ones discussed above – access increasingly became a keyword in discussions around reforming the museum and its educational apparatus, as reflected in an endless number of mission statements, reports, working groups, and conferences. One of the many examples is the American Alliance of Museums' (AAM's) *2016-2020 Strategic Plan* (2016), which proposed "ACCESS" as the first of five pillars that were supposed to allow museums to tackle the future, positioning the word right next to "THOUGHT LEADERSHIP," "EXCELLENCE," "ADVOCACY," and "GLOBAL THINKING."¹³ A particularly important, and ambiguous, role in museums' effort to provide more access to their visitors through sensorial translations of their displays was played by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which was passed in 1990. In the wake of this act, both private and public museums grappled with how to translate the historic bill into the kind of infrastructure that could help reform the making

of exhibitions. In fact, although the landmark legislation signaled that something had to change, there was much confusion among museum administrators over what this change would actually consist of and how it could be achieved.¹⁴ This confusion was related in no small degree to the ADA's complicated judicial architecture. Requiring all public as well as private commercial facilities to be accessible to disabled people, either through retrofitting or through entirely new construction, the ADA's intervention into the federal code regulating the built environment was drastic.¹⁵ The act's complicated judicial architecture was designed to compensate for the absence of any type of federally funded mandate, suggesting that in the last resort it was the market that was supposed to provide access.¹⁶ Where this failed, the only outlet for the public would be the courts: the ADA allowed individuals to file costly lawsuits in cases of alleged discrimination.¹⁷ In the words of Ronald Reagan's chief civil rights lawyer, the ADA is about “the difference between giving a man a fish and teaching him to catch his own.”¹⁸

The challenge that museums were thus facing had to do with the need to find ways of adopting the ADA's requirements, first by identifying access barriers, and second by creating solutions that would require little financial investment, since, again, there was no substantial federal funding to back up the ADA's

mandate for reform. As a result, museums found themselves in a double bind between public expectations and private market forces, with sensorial translations becoming the catchall solution that was supposed to compensate for the lack of public funds.

The mid-1990s saw the publication of several manuals that tried to offer solutions to the difficulties involved in making museum access a lived reality. One of the most important publications in this regard was *Everyone's Welcome: The Americans with Disabilities Act and Museums* (1998), which was commissioned by the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice and the American Association of Museums (now the AAM). The 164-page manual was prepared by Universal Designers & Consultants and was a follow-up to another publication, the 1991 *Museum without Barriers: A New Deal for the Disabled*.

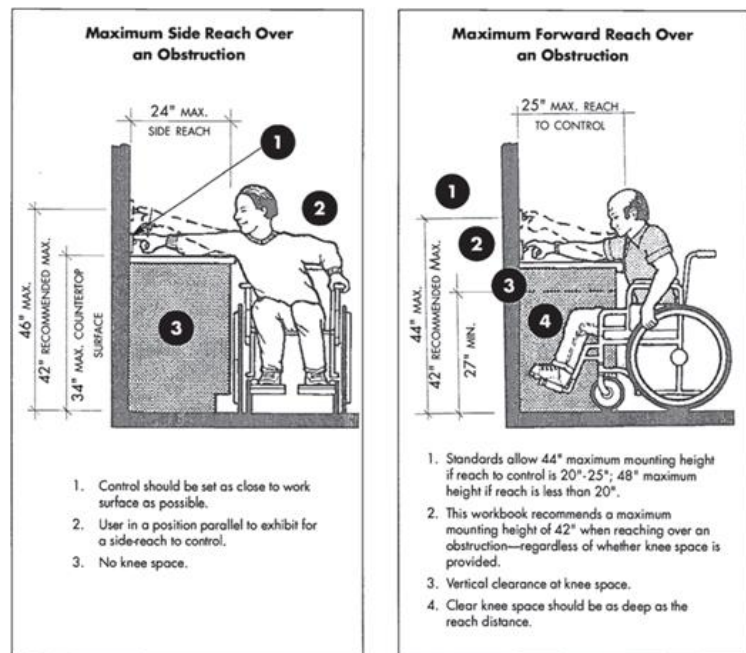
The follow-up had become necessary for several reasons. For one thing, *Museum without Barriers* mostly focused on France, because it was commissioned by the French chapter of the International Committee of Museums (ICOM), with occasional excursions to other European nations. Second, *Museum without Barriers'* transnational focus proved to be more or less useless for US museum administrators, because none of the countries discussed had yet adopted the kind of sweeping regulation that the ADA had only recently pioneered, and that would eventually be adopted across the world, culminating in the 2006 United

Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled People, which would declare cultural access as a human right.¹⁹ In fact, what was most missing from *Museum without Barriers* was technical information about how access could be realized and what compliance with the ADA would actually consist of. This vacuum was supposed to be filled by, among other things, the later collaboration between the US Department of Justice and the AAM: “To museums, accessibility means making the site's exhibit and programs available to all visitors. The goal of both is to eliminate most physical, communication, and policy or procedural barriers.”²⁰

The goal behind *Everyone's Welcome* was to make museums more accessible by creating a framework that would be applicable both to the museum's material infrastructure and to its educational offerings. Many of the suggestions the manual made have been normalized in today's standards, including the replacement of knob hardware with lever handles and provision of specially designated parking.

However, the reforms suggested in *Everyone's Welcome* are best exemplified by the changes that it urges to museum display cases. Comparing two display cases in terms of their usability for people in wheelchairs, one of the illustrations printed in *Everyone's Welcome* describes how increased vertical clearance at knee level (one extra inch) would allow the wheelchair user to engage frontally with an exhibition's

content. Steeped in ergonomics – a research branch that disability activism had been closely interlinked with since the 1970s – the illustration makes clear that access is based on a complex interplay of parameters.²¹ Indeed, in this particular instance, accessibility hinges on the user's arm length as much as on the height and depth of the display case. Altering the built environment – that is, the vertical clearance at knee level – and lowering display cases were supposed to afford greater variability in relation to the human body: two parameters were being altered in order to allow greater variability in a third.



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Universal Designers & Consultants, *Everyone's Welcome: The Americans with Disabilities Act and Museums* (Washington, DC: American

Association of Museums), 93.

Two illustrations of a person on a wheelchair reaching over an obstruction are placed side by side. The heading of the illustration on the left reads “Maximum Side Reach Over an Obstruction,” describing the physical limitations for a wheelchair user to reach over an obstacle when there is no free knee space. The heading of the illustration on the right reads “Maximum Forward Reach Over an Obstruction,” describing the physical limitations for a wheelchair user to reach over an obstacle when there is a vertical clearance at knee space.

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All this may appear to be obscure details, the type of reform visualized here is paradigmatic for the ADA's regulatory ambitions concerning disability. In fact, what the ADA generated was not so much a governing standard or a regulatory norm but a framework based on parametric gradients – the transfiguration of the world into a grid of scales and sliders, ultimately into an infinite set of numerical equations.²² The key reference for this type of structural reform was universal design, a concept already hinted at in the name of the consulting firm that was supervising the publication of *Everyone's Welcome*. A key figure here was the architect Ronald Mace, who had first coined the phrase “universal design” in 1985.²³ Mace's 1990 publication *Accessible*

Environments: Toward Universal Design, written while the ADA was about to be passed, offers a glimpse of what he had in mind: “ *Universal design* means simply designing all products, buildings and exterior spaces to be usable by all people to the greatest extent possible. It is advanced here as a sensible and economic way to reconcile the artistic integrity of a design with human needs in the environment.”²⁴ In Mace's scheme, the reconciliation of efficiency with artistry is not achieved by instituting governing standards – which would in turn rely on some kind of normative subject – but by building “a flexible environment that can be tailored as needed to the specific functional limitations of the user.”²⁵ The crucial point here is the observation that “designers are sensitive to the full range of users for products and buildings.”²⁶ The designers, imagined as nonexperts whose expertise relies on the input received from disabled people, are supposed to turn problems into workable solutions by way of their individual sensitivity, in turn educating the visitor's perception. Based on the designers' innovative solutions, there would be, in Mace's view, a change in the visitor's attitude toward difference, resulting in a more just world, something disability scholar Aimi Hamraie has coined “design pedagogy.”²⁷

In *Everyone's Welcome*, this pedagogy of establishing a parametric structure based on input from disabled consumers is taken one step further when the authors proclaim that “universal design affects not only a

museum's built environment but the many ways it communicates with visitors.”²⁸ The parametric gradient, initially pioneered for interventions into the built environment, including bathroom stalls, here not only is applied to museum architecture but is furthermore expected to reform the museum's entire communication infrastructure, in order to “facilitate an educational encounter between the visitor and the presentation.”²⁹ *Everyone's Welcome* suggests several ways in which this might take place, from label designs featuring “high contrast to low glare” to investments in “audio labels.”³⁰ Additionally, close captioning and sans serif typefaces were designed to render the educational experience in the museum more accessible, inasmuch as they were based on the assumption of difference between humans: “People should be given choices for how they access the content of an exhibition. By combining audio, visual, and tactile opportunities, museums allow individuals to choose the means that best fit their ability, learning style, or educational background... . For example, an audio-taped tour can be supplemented with a large-print script that any visitor may decide to use.”³¹ Crucially, addressing itself to museum educators, *Everyone's Welcome* suggested transmitting each message sent by the museum to its visitors over as many sensorial channels as possible, with each channel being a reproduction of the other. Offering such an abundance of sensorial choice was intended to provide

and channel information in ways that did not presuppose the existence of a normative subject capable of accessing multiple information channels at the same time.

However, whether or not access could really be reduced to a purely technical procedure was a matter of dispute among reform-minded museum educators at the time. For instance, in her book *Access in Mind* (1998), Ann Rayner views sensorial translation as part of a larger project of “intellectual access” that affords visitors new modes of interpretation:³²

It is not translation, and it is perhaps a pity that there is not another word for its specialized meaning in this context... . Interpretation has come about as a result of the demand from visitors to know more about the collections. They are no longer content merely to have objects identified, but want explanations, background information and ways of putting them into a context of things they already know about.³³

In *Access in Mind*, translation figures as a technological necessity for an accessible museum – hence, as more a means than an actual goal. Instead of simply aiming for larger numbers of people being able to view an exhibition on a technical level, Rayner describes accessibility in social terms.

Access in Mind aims to provide increased museum access by establishing structures – not necessarily only technical ones – inside the museum that would allow for more personalized interpretation. For example, the manual stresses “the live interpreter” over automated solutions, such as audio guides.³⁴ This preference is due to human educators being more flexible than machines, although, as the authors admit, it also favors the most expensive solution. Another suggested measure is the establishment of a bottom-up process whereby the content provided on museum labels would be produced by workshops from within the community that makes up the museum's audience. Especially applicable to more local museums, this idea was conceived in order to enable a more individualized connection between the museum and its visitors. Finally, the last solution proposed by *Access in Mind* is what it calls an “Intelligent Label Explorer” (ILEX). Closely interlinked with optimistic expectations from the early Internet as well as with discussions around “dynamic labeling,” ILEX is supposed to “tailor the information which visitors receive about museum objects to individual interest and learning styles.”³⁵ This individuation of the label according to the preferences and differences of each visitor is mediated by an algorithm: as each visitor creates an individual profile, label information is drafted according to individual preferences derived from that profile.³⁶

There are many parallels between *Access in Mind* and

Everyone's Welcome. As with the latter manual, the reform of museum education in *Access in Mind* centers on solutions based not on governing standards or regulatory norms, as was the case with the ADA, but on parametric gradients – creating a flexible structure that would afford variability by sourcing it “from the bottom up.” However, the distinction between translation and interpretation, as suggested by Rayner, hinges on taking the question of variability one step further than the universal designers had done in *Everyone's Welcome*. In fact, by distinguishing between questions of understanding and questions of sensorial perception, *Access in Mind* moves beyond a notion of access that relies purely on physiology. Teaching access is here not just a matter of technically reproducing content across more and more sensorial channels, but of changing the content and form of the stories being told inside the museum.

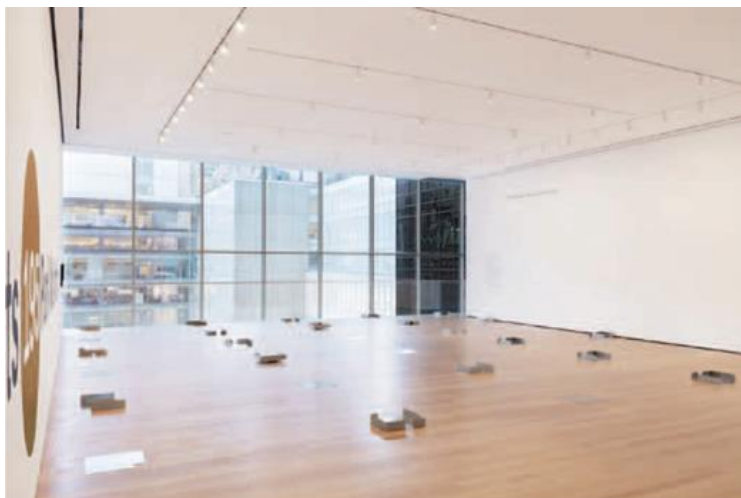
SHIFTING ATTITUDES

In the last part of this article, in an effort to connect the previous two sections, I will focus on the way that sensorial translations have functioned as a focal point for (often tense) collaborations between institutions and artists. My first example is MoMA, where on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the museum's formal commitment to museum education, Francesca Rosenberg, the museum's director of Community, Access, and School Programs in the Department of

Education, published a text that was simultaneously commemorative and programmatic, titled “What Does It Mean to Be an Accessible Museum?” (2017).

Rosenberg, hired as the museum's first full-time access advisor in 1994, shortly after the ADA was passed, offers a glimpse into the museum's ambitions and methods. The central challenge in the long march toward accessibility, she argues, is attitude: people either ignore disability altogether or reduce it to wheelchair users, ignoring the fact that disability is a much broader term that encompasses “hearing loss, developmental disabilities, and mental health issues.”³⁷ This misunderstanding on the part of audience and staff “creates barriers to full accessibility at the Museum” that must be countered by facilitating “an attitudinal shift.”³⁸ According to Rosenberg, such a shift can only be brought about through museum education, and the success of the shift depends on whether “universal design will truly be universally applied.”³⁹ However, Rosenberg goes one step further in her suggestions for organizational reform, stating that “beyond MoMA's staff, our other advocates include artists.”⁴⁰ She mentions artist Walid Raad's verbal transcription of a performance piece that he conceived for his 2015-16 survey exhibition. Rosenberg's point here is the need to extend the applicability of universal design in order to usher in an “attitudinal shift,” and to do so by involving not just museum educators but also artists and artistic practice.

One of the more ambitious collaborations in this context – Park McArthur's exhibition *Projects 195: Park McArthur* (2018-19) – took place less than one year after Rosenberg had made her remarks. As much as this show can be understood as a rigorous application of universal-design standards, it also helps expose some of the issues and limitations of this approach. An attempt to narrate access through the prism of housing, McArthur's exhibition consisted of twenty modular stainless-steel components (*STUDIO/HOME*, 2018), a wall print, two works on paper, slightly altered museum furniture, and an audio guide. The two works on paper – *After Projects 17* and *Emergency Generator* (both 2018) – are copies of the printed sales material for the 53 West 53rd luxury residential tower, designed by Jean Nouvel, a project by private developers who had acquired the air rights from MoMA as part of the museum's 2019 west-end expansion. Almost voyeur-like, the visitor to the exhibition was able to view the high-end amenities and sales prices originally intended to be seen solely by potential buyers.

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Park McArthur. *STUDIO/HOME*, 2018. Stainless steel, twenty parts, each $17\frac{1}{2} \times 17\frac{1}{2} \times 3\frac{1}{2}$, third configuration. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

A wide-angle view of a spacious light-filled museum gallery. Floor-to-ceiling windows look out onto a dense cityscape. On the image's left an artwork painted in black and gold spans an entire wall. On the image's right side is another wall. This wall is entirely white. Across the gallery's wooden floor a metal artwork has been arranged in columns of five and rows of six. This artwork can be installed in multiple ways. Here, each of the artwork's square metal pieces marks a point on an expansive grid.

Image courtesy of the artist and Maxwell Graham/Essex Street, New York.

STUDIO/HOME, the twenty custom-fabricated stainless-steel components in the show, functioned as a commentary on, or a dialectical counterpoint to, the

ostentatious display of wealth depicted on the printed material of the luxury towers. As would-be architectural models, the components suggested an alternative to the towers, which were halfway built when the exhibition occurred. Replicating the floor plan of the exhibition space, each of the twenty components was stackable and modular, with sixteen of them being identical; two having rectangular shapes cut into them representing automatic doors; and two having a sloped pan at their center, representing swimming pools. Throughout the duration of the show, these components were shown in three permutations, suggesting that modular flexibility is a forceful element in the establishment of more just forms of housing.

The audio guide for Projects 195 is entitled PARA-SITES and was written and produced by McArthur and the museum educator Paula Stuttman. Available on MoMA's website both in the form of audio files and as written transcripts, it expands on the stainless-steel components, “an oneiric framework that PARA-SITES flushes out,” as Noah Barker writes.⁴¹ Consisting of eleven episodes ranging between one and nine minutes each, the guide transfigures the “building that would offer below-market apartments for disabled and non-disabled people who mutually receive and provide care” from an architectural model into a lived reality.⁴² A female voiceover offers a virtual descriptive tour that communicates with complete neutrality what one would perceive with one's eyes, ears, and touch if one were to

physically enter the imagined housing complex: a wheelchair-accessible pool, call buttons, and grab bars in showers. An episode entitled “Live-Work Residence” guides the visitor through the architectural models as if they were inhabited: the voiceover describes how, upon entering the virtual building, a visitor would encounter concentrated discussion after a screening taking place on the premises, while from another apartment one could hear what is described as “laughter in the kitchen.”⁴³

The lively audio description that accompanies the sculptural components of Projects 195 stands in clear contrast to those segments of the guide that refer to the prints on the walls. For instance, the audio-guide segment entitled “Is this an investment, pied-à-terre, or primary residence?” simply provides a listing of the exact size, font, and typography used in the print. Another segment verbalizes the entire promotional text about the “Emergency Generator” tower and its advertisement of the building's luxury amenities.

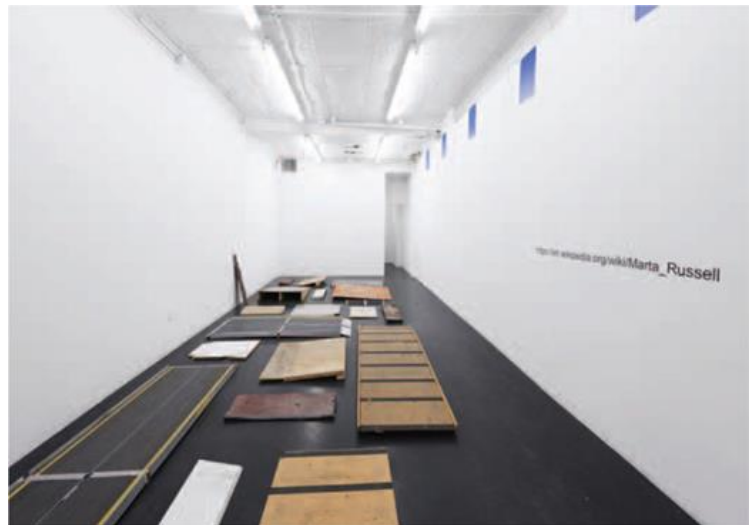
What is dramatized by the radically different ways in which the exhibition's audio guide deals with the steel components, on the one hand, and the luxury towers, on the other, is the fact that the remediation of visual into auditory information is not so much descriptive as it is definitional: while a purely formal definition is applied to the exposition of luxury real estate, a more experiential description is applied to the alternative

construction modeled in *STUDIO/HOME*. In this way, the audio guide stages a clash between description and definition: where the stainless-steel components are filled with meaning by way of a voiceover dreaming of what it would feel like to inhabit their space, the sales material is articulated in strictly formal terms. Somewhat parallel to Rayner's *Access in Mind*, the point here seems to be that different forms of sensorial transcription may correspond to different political projects, with each form relaying the antagonism between the private (luxury tower) and public (alternative imagined in *STUDIO/HOME*) spheres.

As much as the PARA-SITES guide relies on Rayner's distinction between interpretation and translation, it refrains from any attempts at explanation, even in those segments of the audio guide that suggest a public alternative to the private real estate complex. Why did the museum sell its air rights? Why is public housing in New York City such a scarce resource? Why do private solutions continue to win over more public allocations of land? No answers to these questions are given. It seems as if while the exhibition is happy to expose the effects of these developments, it avoids any discussion of their causes.

The connection of cause and effect was handled quite differently in an earlier exhibition by McArthur, *Ramps* (2014), where the artist placed twenty portable ramps on the gallery floor to form a loose grid. Each ramp was taken from an arts organization within the North

American art sector that McArthur had worked with. Consisting of materials that included steel, laminated chipboard, aluminum, a cabinet door, and plywood, the ramps varied greatly in their condition: some seemed never to have been touched, while others were fractured or on the brink of collapse. A lump of wood, leaning vertically against the wall, was identifiable as a ramp only because of its surroundings. In fact, the permutation of functionally identical but qualitatively different objects in Ramps almost raises the objects' status to the level of allegory: visitors can view the show as a story about either the barriers that prevent access or the architectural devices designed to create it.

[View large](#)[Download slide](#)

Park McArthur. Ramps, 2014. Installation shot, Essex Street Gallery, New York.

Inside a room with bright fluorescent lighting

and white walls, a loose grid of nineteen portable ramps cover the majority of the room's black concrete floor. All of the ramps lie flat on the ground, except for one that leans against a wall. On the wall opposite, five safety notice signs are spaced out high at the wall's top edge. The signs are blue with white borders and hold no lettering or textual information. Below the signs is a black vinyl printed onto the wall, reading

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marta_Russell.]

Image courtesy of the artist and Maxwell Graham/Essex Street Gallery.

Purloined by McArthur for the exhibition, each ramp was titled after an organization that had been forced to comply with the ADA's judicial mandate when engaging with McArthur, by providing a ramp so its building could become accessible to the artist: the seven-foot EZ-Access aluminum tri-fold ramp is called *Whitney Independent Study Program* (2013), while the rather sad debris of a laminated chipboard is titled *ESSEX STREET (white)* (2013), the name of the gallery where the exhibition took place. However, although the ramps function as the residues of McArthur's mobility within her professional network, her composition of the grid goes well beyond merely mapping the "interpersonal geometry" that some critics have identified as her primary focus.⁴⁴ Most importantly, the grid functions like a landscape portrait of the post-ADA world: With access left largely to the invisible hands of the market,

the varying conditions of the displayed ramps expose not only the uneven development of the promised remedy to exclusion but also the way in which the infra-structural adjustments have in fact increased the stratification of mobility.

This reference to the ADA is further elaborated on in *Blank, 1-5* (2014), five aluminum signs hung below the ceiling as part of Ramps, as if to capture what is happening on the ground. Blue with a white outline, the signs represent the material base of the accessibility sign, only now bereft of their referent, the (ungendered) wheelchair user. As literally emptied signifiers, the signs appear to direct the viewer anywhere or nowhere in particular. At the same time, *Blank, 1-5* is also the material base of a set of signs fabricated for the art organizations from which McArthur borrowed the ramps in the first place. As these organizations became inaccessible for the entire duration of the show – since their access signs had been taken away – McArthur provided them each with a sign reading “RAMP ACCESS LOCATED AT ESSEX STREET” (the location of her show). In contrast to their voided peers, the signs sent to the art organizations point in two directions: the physical location of the exhibition Ramps (on Essex Street) and the recent expansion of the ADA, the supposed milestone New York City Law Number 2012/0472010, requiring inaccessible buildings to provide instructions on how to get to the nearest available accessible entrance. The ramps and signs in

McArthur's exhibition thus function on two levels simultaneously. On the one hand, they mimic the way in which disability is captured by judicial code. On the other hand, as emptied signifiers stripped bare of their use value for navigating the vast sea of inaccessibility, they stage a kind of contradiction: access is advertised, but not provided.

The causes for this contradiction can be found in the third element of the Ramps show, the work https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marta_Russell (2013). The link, vinyl-printed onto the wall, took the user-visitor to the Wikipedia page for the Marxist historian and disability rights activist Marta Russell and to a summary of her 1998 book *Beyond Ramps: Disability at the End of the Social Contract*. At the time of the page's inception, the summary highlighted how the book mobilizes a vast empirical dataset to explain the decoupling of equality from redistribution that occurs in the ADA, thus helping to reinforce the privatization of public infrastructures, and ultimately to reduce access to market participation while narrowing justice into a matter dealt with solely by the courts.⁴⁵ As Russell puts it, “now that we have our ‘civil rights,’ society expects the disabled to get off public benefits and government is poised to undo entitlements.”⁴⁶

Because they are locked into the context of the judicial architecture of the ADA, the ramps and signs in Ramps lose their arbitrariness. The ADA's emphasis on

changing (the audience's) attitudes appears here to exacerbate the legislation's systematic unwillingness to redistribute “fish” in order to let the market devise lessons how to “catch one.” That the fish might be rotten by the time one gets to catch it is what the neat grid of decrepit ramps exposes. By contrast, the physical residues of political legislation – signs and ramps – are used as a starting point in Ramps to turn the exhibition into a kind of reading exercise, teaching visitors a literacy in judicial code that does not make them hallucinate Buchloh's amoeba-signs but that allows them to identify the codes regulating the infrastructures they are surrounded by and to temporarily collapse the seemingly unbridgeable gap between signs and their referents.



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Park McArthur. Ramps, 2014. Offsite installation shot, AVA, New York.

A city storefront pictured on a sunny day. Through the storefront's large glass window, a tidy, intimate interior with white walls, flooring, and bright ceiling lights is visible. The room is empty except for a matching table and chair and a single wall-hung artwork. On the storefront's glass facade, a blue wheelchair notice sign that reads in all capital letters "ramp access located at essex street" leans against the window. The name of the gallery: A V (Audio Visual Arts) appears in small black lettering in the window's lower right corner. A composite image of trees in winter, a car, and a person raising an arm to take a picture is partially reflected in the glass exterior. A piece of white paper with text too small to read is taped to the store's glass door. The glass door sits one step above street level.

Image courtesy of the artist and Maxwell Graham/Essex Street, New York.

Teaching access, as it has come to be defined since the 1990s by museum education reformers, has been caught in the double bind between public expectation and private market forces that were unleashed by the ADA's inability to break with austere federal budgets. This has given rise to a particular type of bottom-up reform organized around parametric gradients, prominently realized in sensorial translations, such as open captions. Artists like Carolyn Lazard, Jordan Lord, and Park McArthur have taken up the premises of such

reforms by rebalancing their underlying forces, exposing the antagonisms that the reforms redress, or denouncing the reforms altogether. These artistic practices allow us to broaden our understanding of what teaching access might mean, by decoupling it from its narrow focus on shifting individual attitudes and instead belaboring stories about structural conditions. Moreover, the practices formulate a kind of imperative to transfer the (somewhat tedious) realities of bureaucratic discussions from backrooms into the public sphere.

- 1 Marcus Weisen, "Disability Discrimination in Museums Is Systematic," in *Papers and Notes from the Margins to the Core: Sadler Conference for Arts Education* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2010), 54.
- 2 For an introduction into the notion of access, see Bess Williamson, "Access," in *Keywords for Disability Studies*, ed. Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 53-59.
- 3 Colby Chamberlain, "Critical Care," *Artforum* 59, no. 2 (October/November 2020): 161.
- 4 Chamberlain, 154, 157.
- 5 One of the important cornerstones in this regard is Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Marcel Broodthaers: Allegories of the Avant-Garde," *Artforum* 18, no. 9

(1980): 52-59. See also Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," *Artforum* 21, no. 1 (1982): 43-56, and Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism Part 2," *October* 13 (1980): 58-80. Gail Day describes 1980 as the decisive year for the "allegorical turn." Gail Day, *Dialectical Passions: Negation in Postwar Art Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 134.

6 Buchloh, "Marcel Broodthaers," 52.

7 *Ibid.*, 58.

8 Carolyn Lazard, *A Recipe for Disaster*, HD video, 2018.

9 There is a certain proximity here to what Michel Foucault theorizes as "techniques of the self," by which he means "a number of actions exercised on the self by the self, actions by which one takes responsibility for oneself and by which one changes, purifies, transforms, and transfigures oneself." Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), ii.

10 Kaegan Sparks, "Bonded Debt: Kaegan Sparks on the Films of Jordan Lord," *Artforum*, last modified June 9, 2020, <https://www.artforum.com/film/kaegan-sparks-on-the-films-of-jordan-lord-83179>.

- 11 Zeynep Çelik Alexander, *Kinaesthetic Knowing: Aesthetics, Epistemology, Modern Design* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 94, 96.
- 12 Ibid., 90.
- 13 American Alliance of Museums, *2016-2020 Strategic Plan*, last modified February 24, 2016, <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/about-aam/american-alliance-of-museums-strategic-plan/>.
- 14 On the general confusion concerning the ADA and attempts to simplify its language, see Bess Williamson, *Accessible America: A History of Disability and Design* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), esp. 157-81.
- 15 For an overview of the federal regulation, see Robin Paul Melloy, *Land Use Law and Disability* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
- 16 As access studies scholar Bess Williamson has noted, the ADA was aimed at entrenching “the right of the individual economic actor, particularly as a consumer.” *Accessible America*, 150.
- 17 However, the arbiters of justice, namely the courts, have proven to be rather hostile to the legislative efforts, with employers prevailing more than 95% of the time, ultimately making ADA cases “among the least successful classes of cases in the US federal courts.” Samuel R. Bagenstos, “Foreword:

Thoughts on Responding to the Left Critique of Disability Rights Law,” in *Disability Politics in a Global Economy*, ed. Ravi Malhotra (New York: Routledge, 2017), viii.

- 18 Quoted in Edward D. Berkowitz, “A Historical Preface to the Americans with Disabilities Act,” *Journal of Policy History* 6, no. 1 (1994): 108.
- 19 For a glimpse into the recent global history of disability rights and the important role that the ADA played in it, see Lucy Series, “Disability and Human Rights,” in *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*, ed. Nick Watson and Simo Vehmas (London: Routledge, 2020), 72-88.
- 20 Universal Designers & Consultants, *Everyone's Welcome: The Americans with Disabilities Act and Museums* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1998), 11.
- 21 On the complicated relationship between ergonomics and disability activism, see Williamson, *Accessible America*, 151-73.
- 22 The discussion around parametric design and architecture usually sets the 1990s to be the decisive turning point, closely interlinked with new possibilities of computation. Governing standards usually refer to a judicial organization and the setting up of technical limitations by bodies such as the American National Standards Institute in the

United States. In contrast, regulatory norms often are “unwritten” and less institutionalized, somewhat synonymous with social customs. As Reinhold Martin has argued, parametric design differs from these different governance techniques in several ways. Most importantly, in prioritizing equations over values, parametric gradients usher in a new form of governance: “the aestheticized manipulation of parameters aims to domesticate multiplicity by saying, most definitely: Stop! And then: Repeat! Its effect is thus built around the problem of deciding which of the innumerable variables should be preferred.” Reinhold Martin, “On Numbers, More or Less,” in *The Politics of Parametricism*, ed. Matthew Poole and Manuel Shvartzberg (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 54.

- 23 For a history of Ronald Mace in relation to design standards and the shifting judicial landscape, see Aimi Hamraie, *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).
- 24 Ronald L. Mace, Graeme John Hardie, and Jane P. Place, *Accessible Environments: Toward Universal Design* (Raleigh: North Carolina State University, 1990), 1.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 10.

- 26 Ibid., 7.
- 27 Hamraie, *Building Access*, 206.
- 28 Mace et al., *Accessible Environments*, 4.
- 29 Universal Designers, *Everyone's Welcome*, 111.
- 30 Ibid., 114.
- 31 Ibid., 111.
- 32 Ann Rayner, *Access in Mind: Towards the Inclusive Museum* (Edinburgh: Intellectual Access Trust, 1998), 11.
- 33 Ibid., 42.
- 34 Ibid., 46.
- 35 Ibid., 47.
- 36 For an account of how ILEX was programmed, see O'Donnell, Mellish, Oberlander, and Knott, "ILEX: An Architecture for a Dynamic Hypertext Generation System," *Natural Language Engineering* 7, no. 3 (2001): 225-50.
- 37 Francesca Rosenberg, "What Does It Mean to Be an Accessible Museum?," *MoMA Stories*, last modified November 16, 2017, <https://stories.moma.org/what-does-it-mean-to-be-an-accessible-museum-9e9708254dc9>.
- 38 Ibid.

- 39 Ibid. Rosenberg, who started her career around the time when universal design was introduced into museums, has been crucial to the institutional effort to create a set of educational programs under the umbrella term “Access Programs.” Among other things, this includes offering assisted listening devices (ASL) and communication access real-time translation (CART) interpretation for all public programs. Moreover, Access Programs consist of a whole new set of audio guides and a broad array of programming, such as “Create Ability,” a series of workshops that address people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Noah Barker, “The Most Prestigious and Public of Spaces,” *May Revue* 20 (2021): 147.
- 42 Magnus Schaefer, *Projects 195: Park McArthur Exhibition Guide* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018).
- 43 Park McArthur, “PARA-SITE, Episode 10: Live-Work Residence,” Museum of Modern Art, accessed February 20, 2021, <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/55/807>.
- 44 Andrew Backley, “Park McArthur: Geometry, Material, Scale,” *Afterall* 40 (2015): 55.
- 45 Russell belongs to a group of scholars who started

in the 1990s to make historical materialism viable for analyzing the history of disability.

- 46 Marta Russell, *Beyond Ramps: Disability at the End of the Social Contract* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1998), 124. On the civil litigation replacing other modalities of social reform in the ADA, see Matthew Diller, "Judicial Backlash, the ADA, and the Civil Rights Model of Disability," in *BACKLASH Against the ADA*, ed. Linda Krieger (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 62-97.

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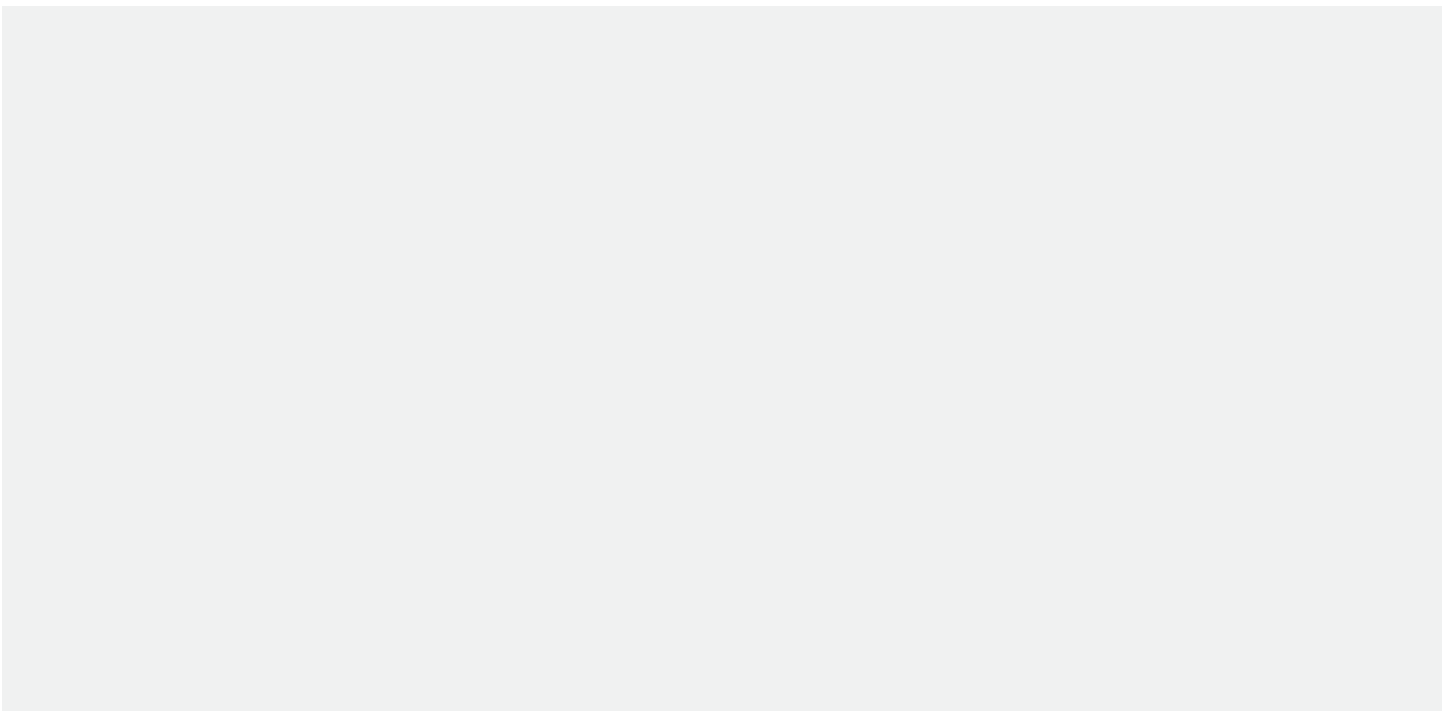
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