

# Experimental Modalities

## *Crip Representation and Access with Electronic Arts Intermix*

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## ABSTRACT

In collaboration with Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), a nonprofit video arts distributor, the author has found videos in EAI's collection that may reflect upon themes of disability and/or engage modes of access like captioning and audio description. The video/film works referenced in conceptual and performance practices have been broadly tethered to the word "experimental" and situated in this context to engage with accessibility even for works that resist and challenge the very nature of legibility. This essay is the author's first attempt to explore an archive to identify video artworks that represent disability (whether deliberately or not) and present alternative modes of access (whether deliberately or not) with the intent of laying a groundwork for curations that tap into possibilities within accessibility formats.

*This filtering and prioritizing is thus actually an unavoidably subjective perspective that renders the describer into an interlocutor who shares her own interpretations and values. We should therefore not understand audio description as straight translation at all.*

—GEORGINA KLEEGER AND SCOTT WALLIN [1]

*Language is the translator. It could translate us to a place where we cease to tolerate injustice, abuse and the destruction of life. Life is language.*

—CECILIA VICUÑA, POET AND FILMMAKER [2]

In the spring of 2023, I presented a curated program at the nonprofit arts distributor Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI) titled *(Mis)Reading the Image: Selections by Darrin Martin*. EAI is the oldest existing video arts distributor in the United States and was founded in 1971 by Howard Wise, whose landmark exhibition *TV as a Creative Medium* was a springboard for artists working in the realm of electronic media. The New York City-based organization has supported media artists in many ways over the decades and continues to include the

works of current and emerging artists in its collection, which is drawn upon as a resource by curators and cultural institutions throughout the world [3]. *(Mis)Reading the Image* took place as a screening event in late March 2023 at EAI's Canal Street location. The event included American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters for the following: welcome comments; introduction; postscreening audio description exercise; conversation between Charlotte Strange, EAI's administrative and development associate, and me; and finally, a Q&A with the audience [4]. The video program itself featured open captions for all the works and audio description for some. It was also made available online courtesy of EAI.

During the process of curating the program, my focus strayed from my original intent of finding work that in some way reflected experiences of disability as I grappled with questions about modes of access across EAI's archive, which includes decades of video art. How can time-based media with cross-modal expressions offer entry points to experiences that may align with current notions of access and disability justice? Could historic works be imbued with new or expanded meanings within these frameworks? While it is important to remember the context of their production and intended audience, artworks can exist both within and beyond these original contexts as curators constantly provide fresh perspectives through their creative juxtapositions and historical interpretations. I found myself intrigued by an array of work that allowed access to be found through and between the space of interpretation and translation.

The curatorial process began back in 2010 after I attended an 11-week Critical Disability Studies residency with a group of other artists and disability scholars. I became curious about the potential and possibilities of curating a program that in some way represents experiences of disability. Where documentary films on the broad subject of disability are as common as they are potentially problematic, my interests as an artist in experimental film and video art led me down a different path, although questions about stereotypes, authorship, and privilege still seemed viable to examine. Initially,

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I began scanning online distribution resources of video art archives but felt that the archives I was searching came up short based on the descriptions and excerpts that I was able to access. In preparation for an East Coast trip, I arranged to see a few works in EAI's viewing room. Rebecca Cleman, who is now EAI's executive director, suggested a few more titles once we discussed what I was after, but a curatorial thread was not revealing itself.

In 2011, presented with an opportunity to screen at the now-defunct Krowsswork Gallery in Oakland, CA, I could only afford artist screening fees with the modest budget that came with my first attempt at curating. In my expanded research, I culled together a program titled *Face Time* consisting of short films and videos mediating the subject of facial difference and distortion [5]. While some of the pieces, specifically the works of Anthony Discenza and Steina, utilized analog processes to layer and fragment multiple faces (Discenza) or affect a singular face changing over time (Steina), other works took on the idea of facial difference. Kerry Laitala's film and one of Steve Reinke's three shorts in the program used stereoscopic and historic case study imagery, respectively, that included images of people with skin afflictions. Kristin Lucas's video performatively situated the face as the site of manifested rashes and sores due to stress and environmental trauma.

The most direct engagement with living subjects grappling with their own disabilities was through the experimental documentary by British filmmaker David Hevey, who placed subjects with facial difference in direct contact and reflection with the archives of Joseph Merrick, more popularly known by his stage name of the "Elephant Man." It was through curating *Face Time* that I first considered ways in which the lack of broad representation in the various canons of experimental film and video art archives can also be a catalyst for creating larger dialogues that may utilize the power and imagination of moving image makers to see a particular aspect of humanity—in this case, the face—through a multiplicity of dialogues and lenses. Even the works that in some way engaged the medical othering of facial difference did so in ways that framed these images in unconventional, although still sometimes problematic, ways such as framing facial difference as a site of erotic (Reinke) or haunted (Laitala) spectacle. Nonetheless, I became interested in the tension inherent in that dialogue.

After a long hiatus from EAI and its viewing room, I resumed my initial search through its archives at the invitation of Cleman and her team, who granted me access to their digital database after I participated in their online panel titled "Radical Accessibility: Making Media Art Collections Truly Accessible" in the summer of 2022 [6]. With an interest in creating events that would allow them to create captions for archived works, EAI welcomed the idea of initiating a series of programs focused on making their archive more accessible. As I began to poke around, I knew I wanted to avoid any notion of medicalized representations of disability, therefore avoiding Shigeko Kubota's *Sexual Healing* or Stanya Kahn's *It's Cool, I'm Good*. Also, knowing that much of the work by

artists with disabilities is not always included in the canon of art histories, I began to consider other types of modalities in which to connect and activate a program drawn solely from EAI's collection.

Deeply considering modes of access, I began looking for works that incorporated texts and captions of verbalized expressions or silent content. Another leading premise was the way in which any spoken description could function as unintentional audio description, whether the images described were presented or merely suggested to activate an audience member's imagination. Curiously, the works included in the program where I held onto some semblance of disability representation (Phyllis Baldino and Shana Moulton) were imbued with tactical acts of added audio description, to be discussed below. Through curatorial inquiries and juxtapositions, I began to consider the ways in which multiple modalities of text, voice-over, image, and other sounds and noises, including music, could be wrapped around notions of access from a variety of angles. My inquiry and selection sought to investigate how the relationships between translation (mostly focused on written content) and interpretation (often dealing with real-time communication between visual and verbal mediums) can become complicated within the realm of experimental videos through the lens of the most popular accessibility practices: captioning and audio description.

#### WU TSANG'S SHAPE OF A RIGHT STATEMENT

*(Mis)Reading the Image* begins with Wu Tsang's *Shape of a Right Statement* (2008), where the artist recites a compelling text originally from Mel Baggs's video "In My Language" [7]. In the second section of Baggs's video, subtitled "A Translation," the text is spoken by a computerized voice, which unpacks the preceding section where Baggs is rhythmically droning with their mouth while enacting repetitive gestures like flicking a chain and jostling the knob on a drawer. The late Baggs was a nonverbal person reliant on text-to-speech software, an autism and disability justice activist advocating for expanding the concept of language to broaden the notion of personhood.

Tsang embodies Baggs's words in a different context, standing still and looking directly at the camera in front of a glimmering silver curtain. She begins the monologue by stating, "The previous part of this video was in my native language." In a robotic voice reminiscent of the original, Tsang, through Baggs's words, effaces the notion of an interaction with the world of objects as something with symbolic meaning; instead, Baggs's gestures are "an ongoing response to what is around me." It is worth noting that these referenced interactions are not presented in Tsang's video/performance, as we are only confronted with Tsang's directly engaged image. In *Shape of a Right Statement*, there is no "previous part of [the] video," but the statement still powerfully evokes a manifesto of sorts. Tsang's source material is, by author Baggs's definition, already "A Translation"; however, it is not derived conventionally between written forms but rather from a language of gestures, repetitions, and interactions with objects. It is a plea for consideration to extend the societal notions

of language, since it is in language per se that humankind posits intelligence.

The video reminded me of an interaction I had during a workshop by the artist collective BLW, where video transcripts were “re-spoken” as an act of embodying historic texts that might otherwise be lost in recorded archives [8]. This sometimes caused critique and alarm as speeches by African American activists were being spoken aloud by groups of mostly white participants. In my experience at one of these workshops, a speech recorded by the People’s Communication Network by Queen Mother Moore at Green Haven Correctional Facility on civil disobedience in the face of racialized violence was made even more potent through the act of speaking the words. While I was familiar with the texts, since I had watched the source material before, the words spoken aloud with no attempts at theatricality, much like Tsang’s delivery, seemed to take hold of me viscerally. While the practice may be problematic, the reverberation of another’s words spoken aloud in the body has a different effect than the silent comprehension of just listening or reading to oneself. Tsang’s stoic stance cracks as her “re-speaking” brings a tear down her cheek through the declaration “this has not been intended as a voyeuristic freak show where you get to look at the bizarre workings of the autistic mind. It is meant as a strong statement on the existence and value of many different kinds of thinking and interaction in a world. . . .” She ends with Baggs’s summarizing sentence, “Only when the many shapes of personhood are recognized will justice and human rights be possible.”

#### PHYLLIS BALDINO’S ABSENCE IS PRESENT

Tsang’s video is followed by one of two excerpts included in the program from Phyllis Baldino’s *Absence is Present* series, which was one of the original videos I was introduced to at the beginning of my curatorial process. The series was made in response to a blind spot that temporarily obscured the artist’s vision caused by a ministroke after undergoing open heart surgery. Both excerpts from *Absence is Present* were accompanied by an audio description undertaken by EAI and the artist at my request. I thought the two short excerpts could function well as examples of audio description since “Absence is Present: MayJuneJuly” (2011) only used diegetic background sounds and “Absence is Present: Dead Nature in the Dark” (2010) was silent. The latter screened later in the program. For a small nonprofit organization supporting artist practices that are not always easily commodifiable, EAI generously took on the task with limited resources and a quick turnaround. While it is ideal to work with access professionals for audio description and creative captioning, there is much value in artists and professionals working in the arts to educate each other and be involved in the process. Baldino enthusiastically participated in the process and



**Fig. 1.** Phyllis Baldino, *Absence is Present: Dead Nature in the Dark*, video still, 2010, 2:36 min, color, silent. (© Phyllis Baldino and EAI)

collaborated with Cleman and Strange, who each provided a voice-over reading of the audio description for her two artworks in the program.

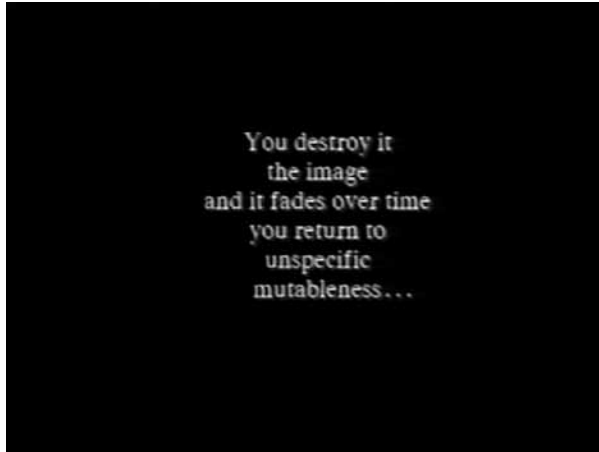
“MayJuneJuly” consists of footage from Claude Monet’s gardens in Giverny displayed across a triptych of rectangular frames. As the audio description conveys, “At any given moment, footage from the gardens is visible in one frame, while the other two display pure color fields inspired by the natural scenery.” During the initial screening, the short was played first without and then with audio description.

The collaborative audio descriptions directed the viewer’s attention to details that may have been overlooked, such as the still frames within the triptych that fade to a color field. In the case of “Dead Nature in the Dark,” which captures a tactile and claustrophobic exploration of an André Derain painting, caressing only its crackling blue hues and wispy white paint strokes (Fig. 1), the slippage between the image and its description is noted, as a detail of the painting’s frame is described after the camera has already passed it by. Here the works lend themselves to a series of interpretations, as additional information that may usually be allocated to a set of program notes layers its way upon the audience through an evocative read.

The blind spot itself recalls the observations of Goethe, as summarized in Jonathan Crary’s *Techniques of the Observer*. Goethe, an observant theorist of perception, noted that phenomena such as floaters and retinal burn originate from within the eye. Goethe, along with Crary, positions the act of sight as a physiological condition situated within the body, rather than being solely based on external observations [9].

#### SELECTIONS FROM THE LIBRARY

Lawrence Andrews’s two video works from *Selections from the Library* (1990) exemplify the most cross-modal approach within the program. Titled “Birthday” and “Anal Denial,” they are part of a larger library of videotapes encompassing



**Fig. 2.** Lawrence Andrews, *Birthday*, video still, 1990, 2:21 min, color, sound. (© Lawrence Andrews and EAI)

histories, facts, fictions, and poems. Both shorts commence with a soothing yet instructive male voice accompanied by supporting text. The instruction is to form a mental picture based on the suggestions, followed by a prompt to describe the image. These initial statements are then expanded by “EXAMPLES,” which branch off in multifaceted ways through the layering of text, language, music, and ambient sound.

In “*Birthday*,” the suggested image revolves around one’s birth, depicted with graphic intensity. The complexity arises from the information that the viewer is watching a video recording of their own birth, captured by their father. This “external memory” gives shape to a trauma that many individuals experience without specific recollection (Fig. 2). For anyone familiar with histories of experimental film, the work may suggest an unnamed relationship with Stan Brakhage’s 1959 film *Window Water Baby Moving*, which includes footage of his wife Jane giving birth to their first child, Myrrena, in the delivery room. The film is graphic yet poetically countered by an intercut scene of a very pregnant Jane being filmed in a gorgeously lit bathtub with Stan by her side. Andrews’s “*Birthday*” incorporates a seaside soundscape featuring seagulls and foghorns. This additional layer of information creates a curious conflict with the suggestive text-based imagery that the viewer is prompted to construct.

In “*Anal Denial*,” Andrews delves into a thicker layer of complexity in the sources he draws from and in the editing of language and sound. He interweaves phrases from Jonathan Swift’s satirical poem “*The Lady’s Dressing Room*” and anthropologist Ernest Becker’s book *The Denial of Death*. Andrews creates a scatological puzzle by displaying these texts writing over themselves against the audible backdrop of a slowed-down, pitch-shifted tune. A spoken anthropological narrative is incorporated, culminating in the statement that “we are born between urine and feces.” Andrews’s two videos activate the viewer’s awareness of their own attentions, as deciphered texts lying upon ambiguously shadowy imagery wrestle with evocative soundscapes and voiceovers.

## THE MEANING OF VARIOUS NEWS PHOTOS TO ED HENDERSON AND FIRE OVER WATER

Two central artworks in *Mis(Reading) the Image* are couched between Baldino’s and Andrews’s sets of shorts: John Baldessari’s *The Meaning of Various News Photos to Ed Henderson* and Cecilia Vicuña’s *Fire Over Water*.

In Baldessari’s 1973 video, the lengthiest of the program at nearly 15 minutes, the artist pins a series of photographs on a wall and asks his friend Ed Henderson to explain their meaning. The black-and-white photographs, cut out of newspapers without their original contexts or captions, are presented one at a time. Baldessari playfully explores the relativity of meaning through the sequencing of images as apparent connections are made between photographs, either by Henderson’s voicings, the viewer’s own interpretation, or a combination of both. The piece was produced when artists were responding to the performative capacities of this new medium, creating situations that reflected upon a present moment in real time. Although not the artist’s intention, the work is presented within the screening as an early example of audio description. Henderson’s unguided participation in the exercise reveals his assumed familiarities with unfamiliar images. His words exhaust themselves pondering some pictures while revealing his own biases when, for example, assuring the audience of a picture’s location in Los Angeles or police intent on pulling their weapons upon a subject lying on the ground.

In the 2014 video *Fire Over Water*, Vicuña offers a visually poetic response to the film *Gasland 2*. The images comprise rescanned and cropped excerpts from the original film but stripped of the film’s original soundtrack. Throughout the video, Vicuña emotionally and melodically rejoins the documentary, sharing personal dreams and correlating them with the environmental horrors depicted as a harbinger of death. In the last section, titled “*The Constitution*,” a red copy of the U.S. Constitution drifts in the water away from the edge of a boat. Vicuña draws attention to humankind’s debilitating position found in the face of environmental catastrophes caused by corporate hegemony. Her cry is urgent and emphasized through her sudden use of captions that aim to reflect her affectations, as she states, “this rooaar was coming under the earth.” The inclusion of captioning serves multiple functions for Vicuña as a multilingual poet whose investment in language is intertwined with the power of life itself. Her video acts as an interpretation of the original film as well as of the present state of affairs. Her poem spoken in English and translated into captions of the same language duplicates her plea in much the same way as the source’s sequel underscores the message that nothing much has changed since the first film sounded the alarm of environmental catastrophe.

## WHISPERING PINES 6

The final video from *(Mis)Reading the Image* is Shana Moulton’s *Whispering Pines 6* (2006). In a program laden with language, Moulton’s alter ego, Cynthia, does not say a word. Her language is that of the silent film star moving through a chroma-green-saturated world of visual complex-

ity filled with New Age tchotchkes. Frustrated when the last piece of a jigsaw puzzle depicting a waterfall goes missing, she sets out to purchase a consolation prize, a tabletop waterfall to add to her collection. She returns home and turns on all her water features as she listens to a soothing instructional meditation exercise. Digitally enhanced bluish streams flow from her New Age devices and then from her eyes (Color Plate E). Eventually, she discovers the missing jigsaw piece embedded in an illuminated waterfall device. When Cynthia finishes the puzzle, we see that the last piece features an image of her face in a quizzical state of despair at the center of a waterfall.

Cynthia, who has been evolving since the character's introduction during Moulton's graduate thesis, has always had some connection with disability. Her origins evolved out of Moulton's interest in constructing wearable garments that included decorative walkers, neck braces, and hemorrhoid cushions. While Moulton, as an artist, has in many ways liberated Cynthia from her disabling fears, the specters of hypochondria, agoraphobia, and even carpal tunnel syndrome always loom. Body consciousness is deeply tied to mental harmony. Cynthia's healing tonic is always a dose of New Age fantasy tethered to a freed imagination that leaves viewers to wonder about her conditions and simultaneously celebrate her acts of transgressive release from an otherwise visibly repressed self.

Returning to a participatory audio description prompt that was initiated at the introduction of the program, I engaged with the audience in ways more aligned with Kleege and Wallins's essay "Audio Description as a Pedagogical Tool" than with the more objectifying attempts prescribed by certain institutional standards of audio description [10]. The audience unearthed ways to express their various attentions and diverse interpretations. Immediately, conflicting responses emerged regarding Moulton's art direction. One audience member described the set design as "calm and peaceful," while another perceived "the environment as colorful, sort of bizarre, not so peaceful but rather having an edge to it that foreshadowed what might happen." The participatory audio description retold the basic narrative, as I had initially asked one-third of the audience to prepare to describe the first couple minutes of the video, one-third the next two, and one-third the end. In that order, audience members suggested an overall circular story arc. Some audience members were eagerly willing to chime in on the overall look and feel of Moulton's work beyond and throughout the narrative construct. The artist's particular approach to compositing images with a "high/low crudeness" was also noted, humorously embracing and exaggerating the artifice of Cynthia's world.

#### AUDIO DESCRIPTION AND OPEN CAPTIONS

Kleege and Wallin define audio description as the process of interpreting visual information into words for individuals who are blind or have low vision, but they also emphasize that description activities can be performed even when no blind person is present. Audio description as a pedagogical

tool fosters dialogue that reveals diversity within audience members' perceptual acumen, opening new understandings of the materials being described [11]. Ultimately, this group practice, along with EAI's initial explorations of audio description with Baldino, represent the first conscious attempts at audio describing works from EAI's collection.

The captions for *Mis(Reading) the Image* were presented as open captions. Throughout the screening of the Andrews videos, a person sitting next to me used her phone to enlarge the text on the screen, as the central text was either not being read aloud or different from what was being spoken. In the post-screening discussion, the woman, identified as MoMA Associate Educator Annie Leist, who is blind, raised a question about the lack of audio description for these particular works and followed it with a thought-provoking observation about the prevalence of incorporating captions to moving image works compared to the less common usage of audio description.

The answer to her question touched upon limited resources in organizing the screening and the involvement of artificial intelligence (AI), which presently could not be easily utilized for audio descriptions, in helping to generate text-to-speech captions. The process of obtaining artists' permissions to caption spoken words and sounds is different from seeking their approval for adding a description to their moving imagery. While the former may be more mechanical and aligned with translation, captioning of music and non-speech sounds would often require a more interpretive approach. Many artists may feel the need to be actively involved in the audio description process, particularly in time-based media where sound cues are already present in the form of dialogue, music, and sound effects. Conversation about the addition of an interpretive audio track in competition with other sonic cues and devices seemed to unpack issues of distraction that could more easily be filtered out in the visual addition of open captions. But perhaps this is also aligned to a public being used to certain conventions. While not the same, subtitles for foreign-language films are more akin to captioned texts when situated in a similar fashion at the lower end of the screen.

#### CHARTING PATHS

In conclusion, *(Mis)Reading the Image* entails one approach to highlighting a cross-modal embrace of accessibility paradigms into the work of experimental moving image practitioners. While selected through a particular lens, the works were also enhanced through a process that was unique and individual as EAI worked closely with the artists, their studios, or estates to help facilitate permissions and strategies for access. Captions were added to some videos directly upon the image (Tsang), while other artists chose to have them appear below their video, not encumbering the images within the frame (Baldessari and Moulton). Some of the works already used text to either exaggerate what was being said through captions (Vicuña) or instigate the building-up of a mental image in conflict with other modes of audible and visual information (Andrews).

Initially, I was astonished to find a limited scope of possibilities when looking through the EAI collection for disability representation. Where was the evidence for Tobin Siebers's premise that the bodies of modern and contemporary art are "crip bodies," as he posits in his influential book *Disability Aesthetics*? Where were the kaleidoscopic bodies produced by Cubism, the altered physiques produced by war and performance art, the bodies pushing against the kitsch athletic ideations of fascism [12]? They could be found in the nooks and crannies of the collection, but honestly, I am still looking. The collection is vast and my methods slow. At the very least, there is still a lot of potential reframing to do and access to build in to crip the archive. All the varying presentation approaches mentioned above—including captioning, artist-led audio description, and participatory audio description—activated a program that kept one guessing and ignited lively conversation. The juggling of modalities opens the door for an infinite array of possible creative engagements. In future iterations, I could see extending some of these diverse practices onto other

longer-form works in partnerships with artists, distributors, and access professionals and inviting others to do the same as the field expands and embraces the creative potentials of access work and disability justice.

I'm presently working on a screening curation for the 62nd Ann Arbor Film Festival titled *What Are Words For?*, mostly through direct contacts with the artists whose works are included (apart from one video from LUX, London's lead film and video arts distributor). This curation will focus on films and videos made mostly by artists who identify as Deaf/deaf or disabled. The works will continue and expand the research described in this essay, as the focus of the upcoming program is on moving image works that build accessibility into them quite consciously at their very inception rather than as an afterthought. These works further blur the lines drawn between interpretation and translation, since captions are used to describe what can only be seen or imagined to be heard, and audio description provides an even greater subtext for fragmented narratives building (and misreading) a multiplicity of images.

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COLOR PLATE E: **EXPERIMENTAL MODALITIES: CRIP REPRESENTATION  
AND ACCESS WITH ELECTRONIC ARTS INTERMIX**



Shana Moulton, *Whispering Pines 6*, video still, 2006, 5:45 min, color, sound. (© Shana Moulton and EAI) (See the article in this issue by Darrin Martin.)