Criptech and the Art of Access
Introduction to Special Issue

"Access denied" is a common error message that notifies a user when they do not have system permissions to access a virtual domain—but in this issue, "access denied" signals a broader critique of how disabled people are regularly locked out of social and technical infrastructure. Such encounters with "access denied" often generate new pathways and avenues for creative intervention.

Laura Forlano's collaboration with artist Itziar Barrio, *did not feel low, was sleeping* (2022)*,* which engages with the raw data of Forlano's "smart" insulin pump and sensory system for type 1 diabetes, makes evident how data is made and intimately situated, and the often-invisible work of caring for machines that are designed to care for us. Excavating disabled histories in video art collections, artist-curator Darrin Martin "crips the archive" [1] by integrating descriptive captions and participatory audio description. In live music events, haptic vests, originally developed for d/Deaf and hard of hearing individuals, have made their presence felt. At Crip Raves and Access Magic happenings, a haptic DJ artfully mixes the sonic feed through the frequency, location, and intensity of vibrations, expanding musical resonance to include nonauditory capacities.

These recent projects, though distinct in their technical applications, instantiate a nascent movement we identify as *criptech art*. Criptech art names a collective group of disabled artists who engage with digital and scientific technologies as both a creative medium and avenue for crip practice. Criptech art is both a reaction and response to the tools and techniques of contemporary art, science, and medical and tech industries that amplify systemic ableism.

Technology is often characterized as a rehabilitative or curative tool for disability. This technoableist narrative distorts an important truth: Disabled people have always experimented with their technologies to find ways forward, sideways, and around systems and infrastructures not designed for us [2–5]. Like activists who smashed curb cuts into inaccessible sidewalks for wheelchair users, these tactics expose structures of inequity and forge access. These methods often take the form of political action and noncompliance, as disabled users aim to bend, break, glitch, or dismantle systems that deny them access. This practice of ingenuity and agency underpins the praxis of *crip technoscience*. Crip technoscience, as defined by scholar-activists Aimi Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch in their 2019 manifesto, recognizes disabled people as "experts and designers of everyday life"; it describes "both a realm of practice *and* a field of knowing that has emerged from it" [6]. The term "crip" importantly reclaims disability as a valued identity and site of embodied knowledge.

In this context, crip is both a noun and a verb; it is a subject position with political agency, and it is also an action that effects change through the interrelation of entities. When disabled people crip objects and environments to make access, they also reinforce disability's place in the cultural landscape.

The artists in this special issue, *Criptech and the Art of Access*, bring this inventive, noncompliant approach to media art in this emerging field. As Tobin Siebers writes, disability "questions the presuppositions underlying aesthetic production and appreciation," calling for disability as "an aesthetic value in itself worthy of future development" [7]. Disability arts [8] is steeped in artistic mediums such as painting, sculpture, performance, and textiles, from Riva Lehrer's lushly painted portraits, and Bill Shannon's virtuosic b-boying with crutches in urban spaces, to Sandie (Chun-Shan) Yi's sculptural bodily adornments. Not just advancing disability as an aesthetic, these works showcase disability's metamorphic power to, for example, transfigure the crutch into a dance partner. So what new disability aesthetics might emerge when artists engage with creative technologies?

Tangibly different in form and practice, technoscience and media art are often abstract and opaque. Algorithms, data, software, translation tools, gaming platforms, AI, bacterial cultures, plants, and haptics are the materials of criptech art. Enmeshed within other complex technological networks and systems, they simultaneously constrain and extend new

pathways for human sense perception and knowledge. As the artists and contributors from this issue and beyond attest, by cripping creative technologies, we foster an aesthetics and politics of access.

"Creative access," "access aesthetics," "access as art," "open access," "aesthetic in-access," and "integrated access" are various appellations that affirm the full-throated arrival of access as a creative medium [9–14]. The function of translation is a longstanding priority (and perhaps limiting) function for accessibility, which is what makes it so well suited for the arts. But access's capacity to be expressive, interpretative, and even transformative marks a cultural shift in how we conceive, make, and deploy access. Georgina Kleege and Scott Wallin's "participatory description," for example, transforms visual description and audio description for blind and low-vision users into a collective access project [15]. In *Alt-Text as Poetry*, Finnegan Shannon and Bojana Cokylat adapt this technique even further, transforming alt-text from the protocol of neutral observation into the domain of creative expression and poetry [16]. Recognizing the power of tech-supported participatory description as an aesthetic medium, disability-arts dance ensemble Kinetic Light developed Audimance, an app for rich multichannel audio description [17]. In various domains of arts practice, access as a creative principle has produced exciting new forms of aesthetic expression and engagement. Exhibitions that center access in their artistry and programmatic design include Cooper Hewitt: *Access+Ability*, Tangled Arts' *HELD*, Joseph Grigely's *In What Way Wham?* and *Disrupt and Resist,* Carolyn Lazard's *Long Take, Crip Time* at Museum für Moderne Kunst and *E.A.A.T.* as well as labs like the Critical Design Lab*,* Kinetic Light's LAB*,* Revision Center for Art and Social Justice, and UC Berkeley RadMad Disability Lab. The fluorescence of disability arts is not limited to the United States and North America; Europe, Australia, Brazil, South Korea, Rwanda, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Qatar are among a growing number of regions also investing in disability artistry and access [18]. As Alice Sheppard reflects, "The disability arts community is really in a moment of vast experimentation" [19].

Access is a creative engine that spurs experimentation in criptech art. Artists, performers, curators, designers, and others critically excavate and transform assistive technologies (and their absences) in digital artmaking tools, platforms, and spaces. Working within the affordances of creative technologies, criptech art amplifies both the labor and the outcomes of access along multiple axes. By this we mean access is situational and relational—it responds reflexively to its environment, institution, cultural context, and audience, and to other works and bodies in its orbit. If we look at the rise of creative access and some of its earliest practitioners over the last decade, there's a striking (but unspoken) historical alignment with contemporary assistive technologies like automated captioning, alt-text, and voice recognition software that helped make media accessible to a broader population. The ubiquity of these tools suddenly afforded inexpensive, widely-available opportunities for media creators to play with access software, recognizing and dramatizing many of its failures too, as historian Elizabeth Ellcessor has documented [20]. This issue aims to acknowledge the entwined genealogies of disability culture, artistry, access, and technological innovation in criptech art and to chart its future.

Criptech art rejects a universal or singular experience. It opens up prismatic entry points for creating and experiencing art—works are inherently multiplicitous, fragmented, sensorily overwhelming, or even overdetermined. As Carolyn Lazard notes, "access has this capacity to break through the boundaries of medium, because of the way it makes art necessarily iterative. Through access, a single artwork might exist as a description, as a notation, as sign language, as a transcript or as a tactile object—depending on what people need" [21]. In Andy Slater's *Unseen Sound*, an immersive virtual environment is navigable only by sound, or in sonic text descriptions that are its only visual artifact. Artists repurpose the very technologies they are using to generate access, but access can also fundamentally transform the functionality of the hardware, as in the case of Nat Decker's *TOUCH*, an immersive work created on New Art City for both browser and headset VR. Access is a technology, too.

Criptech and the Art of Access gathers voices representing this multivalent practice. The emerging conversation documents various sites and temporalities where criptech art emerges, from research labs, home studios and beds, crip raves, galleries and exhibitions, academic and arts institutions, wild spaces and ecologies, videoconferencing, VR, and software platforms. Though disparate in topic and medium, these artists, curators, and arts leaders express a shared commitment to experimentation. They critique and remake technologies of surveillance (from the medical gaze to the collection of biodata), communication software such as eye-gaze tracking for augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) and speech synthesis, machine learning, as well as media arts archives. They imagine new relationships with nature, machines, and each other. They raise challenging questions about how to meaningfully collaborate with disabled artists with care and attention in a time when disabling forces of mass incarceration, institutionalization, oppression, and the pandemic hang like specters. Criptech art not only challenges, but also recalibrates the systems, tools, and techniques by which contemporary aesthetic production and appreciation are increasingly determined and codified.

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6   Aimi Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch, "Crip Technoscience Manifesto," *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* **5**, No. 1 (2019) p. 2.

7   Tobin Siebers, "Disability Aesthetics," *PMLA* **120**, No. 2 (2005) p. 543.

8   Disability arts refers broadly to art created by people who identify as D/deaf, disabled, mad, neurodivergent. See *Studies in Social Justice* **15**, No. 2 (2021): Cripistemologies of Disability Arts and Culture: Reflections on the Cripping the Arts Symposium.

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