

The Art of Accessibility: A Critical Analysis of Ableism at Washington University in St. Louis

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Abstract

Systemic ableism is a longstanding issue in our society which has led to views of disability as a deficit. Such ideas emerge especially in institutions of higher education, where students remain largely unaware of environmental barriers contributing to disability, and administrators follow laws to the letter, rather than work to enhance the experience of students with disabilities. Discrimination in art, whether against creators or consumers, has grown a prominent issue in the museum environment, as programming is curated to the 'typical' museumgoer and overlooks the potential of inclusion as an artistic practice and an improvement upon all patrons' experiences. In this manuscript, I evaluate ableism in higher education and art as separate but equal environments whose intersection creates a disproportionately negative effect on disabled students. I highlight the discriminatory record and practices of one university, Washington University in St. Louis (WashU), as well as its administration, student research, and advocacy. I then discuss the history of ableism, namely ocularcentrism, in the museum experience and its impact on artists and patrons with disabilities. Contrasts are drawn between the built physical environment and art, each underpinned by ableist expectations of how disabled individuals should experience the world, beauty, and accommodation. A literature review reveals that accessibility in art is often sidelined and maintained only by disabled artists. Alternatively, accommodations for environmental mobility are frequent targets of beautification efforts, perpetuating ideals that accommodations must be visually appealing, becoming art themselves, to warrant their existence. I discuss methods of accessibility implemented by community establishments, several located in St. Louis, Missouri, as guidance for future developments in accessibility and accommodation in a combined university and museum setting. Though this manuscript largely focuses on establishments in one city, it aims to inspire greater understanding of the lived experience of disability and its historical exclusion at the intersection of higher education and art.

As tour guides shepherd prospective students and their families across the campus's cobbled pavement, they always turn to a special phrase:

“We’re Washington University *in* St. Louis, not *of* St. Louis.” I often ponder what they mean by that. It seems to be an expression of belonging and commitment to the city and its community, but it can be difficult to see that in action. I hardly see WashU undergraduates taking the city’s public transportation, though I know they may not have other avenues to explore the city. Freshmen are not allowed personal vehicles on campus, and many undergraduate students utilize university-owned shuttles whose service extends to nearby apartment buildings on the public-facing Delmar Loop. Clubs seem to rather enjoy small get-togethers with peers and pre-professional panels with university professors and doctors, but rarely do you see a group working directly with St. Louis residents outside the university.

In the same way, the university’s administrative departments can be out of touch with the needs of their student body. One of the most disheartening examples of this can be found in the Department of Disability Resources (DR). I do not identify as disabled nor can I speak personally for the experience of disabled individuals, as what I do know comes from personal research and connection with those who do identify as disabled. I first became aware of the university’s problematic DR department through a student in the class of 2026 who wishes to remain anonymous and is a profoundly deaf bilateral cochlear implant user. Their first impression of the Washington University DR was disappointing, as they had received “less accommodations from a private university than [their] publicly funded high school” (personal communication, December 4, 2023). During their first semester of university, they were denied use of a Smart Pen, an assistive note-taking device enabling audio recording of lectures. Due to this, they expressed gratitude towards lecturers who continue to record and post-class lectures online to pick up any missed information during class sessions. However, they wondered aloud how much their academic career would be negatively affected if, in a post-Zoom era, professors stop utilizing online platforms.

This student also made me aware of underlying themes of ableism at Washington University in disciplines that regularly interact and work with d/Deaf and Hard of Hearing (HoH) populations. In this article, the term d/Deaf is used to reflect that the physical presence of deafness and having a Deaf identity are separate and deserve such distinction in writing. During a pre-professional panel discussion with university-affiliated audiologists, speech-language pathologists, and otolaryngologists, this student had mentioned a desire to work with the university’s top-ranked audiology program on their cochlear implant research. To the student’s dismay, he “felt the medical gaze,” only being viewed as a patient by the very people who are charged with uplifting d/Deaf and HoH voices and encouraging inclusion. In the research this student has produced in conjunction with the university, they feel doubt as to professors’ intentions and perceptions of them as a cochlear implant user: “I feel like I’m being used to do research [the professor] is interested in but can’t do by himself because he doesn’t want to be called ableist” (personal communication, December 4, 2023).

Discovering the reach of systemic ableism at a top-25 institution for higher education even in my short time there was perplexing. I easily discovered several recent articles from *Student Life*, Washington University's independent student-run newspaper, which addressed student concerns regarding DR's lack of accommodations. As I read, I walked around campus with fresh eyes to the large-scale problems inside. Some students have been unable to visit several residential halls due to their lack of elevators. The long winding ramp near the residential dining hall had dangerous overhanging plants and turns too sharp to safely navigate on a bicycle, much less in a wheelchair. Certain class buildings even have cramped, hidden-away elevators hardly wide enough for passengers without mobility aides. It seems the university upholds a longstanding history of complacency with student complaints regarding its physical environment, so long as it retains the aesthetic value of its Collegiate Gothic architecture. When university officials see their campus as a canvas, the department with the most insight and power to stand up for the rights of students with disabilities should be found in Disability Resources. However, this department has found itself aligned with the best interests of university officials rather than their students.

DR representatives commented in each interview with *Student Life* that their main purpose was to ensure Washington University was abiding by the law, which they were, and that such large-scale issues were not within their view. But this raises the question that if the department built to aid disabled individuals in navigating their university experience cannot fulfill that purpose, who will? The university doles out accommodations as generalized gifts to disabled students, expecting that what works for one must work for all the rest and that what they as non-disabled administrators believe is a reasonable accommodation must be so. It appears disabled students and allies are the only ones who can advocate for a change in leadership or policy in necessary accommodations.

Historically, the DR's mindset has remained the same: basic compliance with the law is valued more than addressing environmental barriers. Even after the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed and charged universities with a duty to provide greater accommodations, they were allowed to delay changes to inaccessible buildings which were older or may cause undue financial burden. Thirty-three years later, Washington University remains deadlocked with their students, refusing the accommodations they ask for and resisting renovation to older buildings for the purpose of beautification and new construction on the modern East campus.

The systemic ableism at Washington University in St. Louis culminates in the execution and display of art in the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum. Walking inside the building, you first see a brilliant explosion of colored light emanating from Tomás Saraceno's glass sculpture aptly entitled 'Cosmic Filaments.' Unless, of course, you couldn't see it. Every piece of art inside the Kemper walls remains

inaccessible to blind and low-vision individuals, who for the purposes of this article will be abbreviated ‘B&LV.’ The museum has no audio description (AD) or tactile elements, accessibility measures which when executed well allow B&LV individuals to experience art as an aesthetic and storytelling event.

The museum boasts many programs and exhibitions supporting the university’s mission for diversity and inclusion, yet disability seems to have been excluded from the conversation. And with little recognition and aid from departments like DR, it is unsurprising to find such ocularcentrism, a bias towards sight considering it the dominant and most important sense. There is a need for multisensory programming that could educate Kemper patrons about the perspectives of disabled artists and enhance the uniqueness of the museum experience for more than just disabled individuals, just as there is a need for individual accommodations apart from a societal push for visual aesthetic beautification and preservation of inaccessible architecture. Until Washington University in St. Louis lifts and values disabled voices, employing them in their administrations, and educating their students and health professionals on the lived experience of disabled individuals, the institution will continue to prioritize the comfort and visual artistic value of historic architecture over the needs of its community.

A Brief History of Ableism at Washington University

In the university environment, the general population of students and administration remain unaware of or indifferent towards the needs of disabled students. Therefore, disabled students often utilize resources like the Student Life newspaper to voice their concerns and self-advocate for improved treatment and awareness. One such former student, Danny Lawrence, explained his discouraging encounters with DR officials to Student Life. Lawrence, who is blind, often found himself in a stalemate with DR regarding his need for academic and mobility assistance: “Imagine I’m totally blind. I’m in a society situation here every day, everything is visual. I was a fish out of water.” A series of academic assistants throughout his time at the university either had their hours cut by half or were taken from him entirely, occasionally mid-semester. In addition to this, as a student of color, Lawrence felt uncomfortable that the university would not provide him with reliable alternative transportation aside from police cars (Danner, 2021). He was continuously left without the accommodations he felt necessary to navigate his coursework and campus. Furthermore, Lawrence and many other disabled students often felt fearful that the department was using the ADA against them: the law only requires the provision of ‘reasonable accommodations’ to individual students, but what the department and students each considered to be reasonable differed considerably.

This current complaint echoes across a history of exclusion and push-back from institutions of higher education against doing more than what is required to enhance their students' experience. In 1989, a year before the ADA was passed into law, Washington University Law student Cynthia Brown filed a suit against the school for violating Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This act required federally funded institutions not to discriminate against individuals with disabilities, and Brown's suit was one of about 30 at that time against universities falling under Section 504's reach. Again, the university replied that they were providing reasonable accommodations, their facilities were sufficiently accessible, and they would seek to dismiss the suit post-haste (Marcotte, 1989). The long history of Washington University's dismissal of the needs and voices of disabled students points to a larger issue: ableism is a systemic and central issue at the university.

With a proud outward mission of diversity and inclusion, disability is often left out of the conversation. As Lawrence and other students suggested, a main contributor to this problem lies in having a non-disabled administration and DR department. Students have often complained the lack of representation has led to the generalization of disability, as accommodations from them feel more like a quick-fix or a 'one-size fits all' mechanism (Danner, 2021). The lack of disabled administrators to aid disabled students has led to a misunderstanding of the factors that influence and cause disability, as well as what is reasonable and necessary to resolve student complaints. This misunderstanding reflects the emergence of societal views of disability as an inability or biological limitation.

Contextualizing 'Disability:' Medical and Environmental Models
 Many factors that contribute to disability are often misconstrued or overlooked by current society. Ignorance regarding these factors fosters ableist expectations about the experience of disability, creating societal labels of disability to imply a physical insufficiency. Bioethicist and Deaf advocate Dr. Jackie Scully discusses how certain perspectives on disability cannot capture its whole experience. The 'medical model' of disability "wrongly locates 'the problem' of disability in biological constraints...neglecting the social and systemic frameworks that contribute to it," (Scully, 2004, p. 651). Viewing disability even simply as a 'problem' results in biased and discriminatory perspectives, such as an inability or unwillingness to accommodate the needs of such 'problems.' In a social model, one begins to consider what makes disability disabling: environmental barriers and social constructs. For example, Scully relates the social model's distinguishment between impairment and experience to being hard of hearing and having a lack of subtitles on television programs (Scully, 2004). One who is d/Deaf or HoH may not feel the impact of

‘disability’ until it becomes a label used against them to justify exclusion from certain aspects of life or programming.

And when considering programming, disabled and non-disabled individuals may have quite different ideas as to what access truly looks like. When disability is considered as a biomedical, individual detriment, what accommodations non-disabled institutions provide feel to them like a ‘saving grace’ or mercy that they deign to offer. Moreover, this attitude of exclusion leads to biased views as to how disabled individuals should graciously receive and experience accommodations, contributing to the notion that physical accommodations to overcome environmental barriers should also serve to appeal physically and visually to a non-disabled ‘audience.’

Environmental barriers exist on a spectrum that lies in societal misconceptions about disability. Many accommodations become barriers in themselves due to attempts of over-aestheticization to the point of ineffectiveness or even damage. Other environmental barriers persist due to too little attention: they never received accommodations to begin with. Research regarding the creation of environmental barriers provides more insight into how collective attitudes about disability contribute to these obstacles. One such study, The Mobility, Disabilities, Participation, and Environment Project at Washington University in St. Louis, was funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and was created with the goal of discovering typical environmental barriers and facilitators for those with low mobility to participate in daily life. The research was conducted in focus groups: some with disabled individuals and their significant others, some with healthcare professionals, and others with Built Environment Professionals (BEP). One of the most pertinent findings: the BEP group was the sole group which considered the built environment, defined as man-made or modified spaces providing spaces for human activity, as a facilitator for participation in daily life rather than a barrier (Gray et al., 2003). This may be due to perceived notions of disability and generalizability, but it points to something more.

The composition of the BEP group included graphic and interior designers, museum supervisors and builders, and architects; all occupations which rely on visual senses to convey meaningful experiences and beauty to their audience. In short, it was the group of artists who considered their work on the built environment as a facilitator for participation in life. It is possible that the BEP group may consider their work as a facilitator in that filling an environment with aesthetic and art could also fill it with life and vivacity. It is also possible that this BEP group believes they are doing good work for disabled individuals and do not consider how their lived experiences dictate the true needs behind accommodations rather than creating something beautiful for the rest of its visitors. No matter their beliefs, it is clear that the professionals most closely involved in the creation of built environment consider their work principally as art, rather than considering the gravity of infusing the

environment with proper physical accommodations. Further, in most cases of accommodations, it seems the non-disabled departments in charge of creating a diverse and accessible experience have a goal to create an enjoyable experience for non-disabled visitors and provide a non-disabled person's idea of reasonable accommodations for those who are disabled. This highlights the necessity of including disabled individuals and healthcare professionals in the conversation of what are important environmental barriers and facilitators.

Student Advocacy

WashU students are beginning to take an evidence-based approach to survey their institution's accommodations by utilizing another product of their university's research, the Community Health Environment Checklist (CHEC). Occupational Therapists created the original CHEC in 2004, which has since been adapted to survey specific settings and objectively assess locations on their accessibility for disabled individuals ("Usability, Not Just Accessibility," 2013). It was designed by surveying people with disabilities to determine their perceptions of environmental barriers and for use by occupational therapy students to assess a wide variety of sites.

Ability, a student advocacy group at WashU, received CHEC training to address accessibility on their campus beyond what they recognize as "the shortcomings of ADA standards," (Quinones, 2018). By such ADA standards, the University has acknowledged that 15 buildings on the Danforth Campus have no accessible entryways and 17 other buildings have entire floors that cannot be accessed, most of the inaccessible buildings and floors being in residential halls. In total, 64 buildings are inaccessible for those with physical disabilities by ADA standards. *Ability* wants to go beyond ADA standards to highlight the consistent problems that cause environmental barriers across campus and make a push to solve the smaller projects until large-scale renovations can make whole buildings more accessible. They advocate for improvements such as better signage and accessible doorways into buildings and communal bathrooms through promoting communication and direct action between the administration and student body (Quinones, 2018). Though *Ability* has not yet inspired large university-endorsed changes to campus accessibility, their efforts fortunately have not been met with pushback from university officials. As of 2023, *Ability* has benefitted the student body through both their partnership with WashU occupational therapists, tallying 11 up-to-date CHEC evaluations on Danforth Campus buildings, and a commitment to elevating the concerns of students with disabilities (Goldstein, 2023).

Architectural Preservation and Urban Beautification as Environmental Barriers

While there are still no large-scale improvements to accessibility on the Danforth Campus, inaccessibility flies in the face of the University's mission for diversity and inclusion by alienating those with physical disabilities from even attending their classes. Former physics graduate student Dr. Siera Stoen spoke out when she needed to use a wheelchair for a year and noticed the elevator in the physics department's Crow Hall was too small for such a device to fit inside. The University informed her that her position as a lab teaching assistant must be terminated, and she would instead work as a grading assistant since she could no longer access the laboratories (Nakshatri, 2017). Stoen's story speaks to more than just her own experience but the potential experiences of any wheelchair-using student who can no longer take a physics lab or complete necessary components of a physics degree. There is an elevator, adhering to the University's compliance with ADA law, but still proves to be inaccessible by the lived experience of those with disabilities.

One may wonder why such a small elevator was included in Crow Hall in the first place if it cannot fit mobility-assistive devices: this may be due to reluctance to build from ADA guidelines, as the law allows pre-ADA buildings to remain inaccessible if renovation would cause undue financial burden on the university. In the past year, students have watched as the university closed several libraries on campus and de-scaled peer-led team learning programs in the name of saving money. As such resources for academic success of the general student body were acceptable cuts to save money, it seems unlikely that the university would allocate massive funding to aid a disabled population who already struggle with receiving small-scale, personal accommodations. According to current DR director Chris Stone, "The main purpose is that we ensure the University is protected...our role is to ensure the University is doing what it is required to do," (Goldstein, 2023). Additionally, the university's pushback in renovating its older buildings may draw from a desire to preserve the original architectural artistry and expand more modern buildings. Currently, the University has focused its attention in the newer buildings on the east campus, so older inaccessible buildings will likely remain in this state.

Furthermore, many accessibility issues on WashU's campus seem to spring from negligence due to favoring the visual aesthetics of WashU's architectural beauty. For example, students have noted elevators being hidden in the back of buildings, obscured accessible entrances, and some where students must travel up or down several steps to access. Others were troubled by large overhanging plants drooping onto ramps that have ADA-compliant steepness but swerve haphazardly between levels of stairs (Quinones, 2018). Even the ground can be difficult to navigate, as in many spots it consists of uneven bricks and stones. This manner of inaccessibility stems from a desire to appeal to urban beautification standards and to push what accommodations are required out of sight of the non-disabled population. Elevators are hidden as to not detract from

the visual beauty of the old, historic buildings. Cobblestone adds to the old-world beauty as well as mobility difficulties (Goldstein, 2023). In the heart of the University, one uncovers a standoff between inherently ableist views of the world as art and expectations for how it should be not only experienced but appreciated.

In addition to the preservation of architecture, the movement for urban beautification, especially of accessibility measures, becomes problematic when beauty is undefined for those with disabilities. ‘Beautification’ can be defined as a growing aesthetic movement related to various departments of psychology, philosophy, art, culture, and identity. The goal of beautification is to build public spaces that meet the needs of its population and improve the environmental quality (Allahdadi, 2017). Oftentimes, the ‘beauty’ addressed in the urban aesthetic movement excludes the needs of a disabled population. Just as overhanging plants and cobblestone pathways inhibit mobility at Washington University in St. Louis, similar attempts of beautification have been observed worldwide. In Ghana, for example, experts discovered most stairways and even ramps created for accessibility purposes were covered in smooth, slippery tiles for aesthetic purposes that made such environments inaccessible and dangerous (Naami, 2019).

When buildings and architecture become no more than mediums for visual art to appeal to a non-disabled public, accessibility measures become disguised or ignored entirely to adhere to standards of a visually aesthetic experience. The existence of this trend to beautify the world and preserve aesthetic, albeit inaccessible, features has revealed the fact that disability is thought of by society as the ‘problem’ of the disabled individual, as it is believed they cannot experience art and beauty in the world except at a deficit.

Ableism Against Blind and Low-Vision Artists

Though disability is a label enforced by modern society as something to overcome, the true concept of disability allows disabled individuals to create and enhance life in novel ways. The publication *Art in America* invited four blind artists, filmmaker Rodney Evans, dancer Kayla Hamilton, visual artist Emilie L. Gossiaux, and performance artist Bojana Coklyat, to discuss the realities of embracing their identities and the ableism they faced in the process. The article “Ways of Not Seeing” contextualizes the topic of ableism in art with an opening visualization of Georgina Kleege, notable author and activist in the field of disability studies. She discusses the unfortunate departure from a creative experience in audio guides meant for B&LV visitors at the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). The museum offered three sets of audios: mainstream, blind, and child. After listening to all three, she noticed a disappointing objectivity of the audio meant for B&LV visitors like herself—instead of exploring the art in a playful or historically rich

way, like in the other two audios, the story meant for B&LV patrons was more of a technical description in visual terms. Kleege argued a combination of rich historical detail and enriching, sensory prompts from the mainstream adult and child audios would be more beneficial in allowing B&LV individuals to have an experience with the artwork instead of listening to concrete visual descriptions (Leland, 2022). This existing AD highlights the disparity in how disability is experienced by disabled individuals and treated by society: in this case, blindness was categorized as a visual deficit that must be supplemented by a non-blind person's objective visual description rather than an opportunity to experience the artwork in non-visual ways. Such ableism in the museum setting is emblematic of the larger problem that non-disabled populations have often false expectations of the "needs" of disabled individuals, as well as expectations of how they should be grateful for any accommodations offered to meet the supposed "needs."

"Ways of Not Seeing" brings to light the stigma surrounding blindness and art as a prominent battle in the experience of disabled artists claiming their identities. The panelists had a shared turning point in their careers which Hamilton summed up as discovering how to "de-center sight as [the] primary mode of consumption" (Leland, 2022, p. 62). Instead of allowing society to dictate the label of disability as a method of control and isolation, they used it to create exceptional new viewpoints in art—viewpoints that could not have come about if they did not identify as B&LV artists. Coklyat, bothered by doctors' lack of faith and understanding of her capabilities as her vision deteriorated, began to research the acceptance of B&LV individuals in the workforce in years past. A common job allotted to them, she found, was broom-making. Seen as a low-skill job, it was a menial task that society believed was at the peak of B&LV individuals' capabilities. Coklyat created a performance piece entitled 'Buy My Broom,' in which she made brooms onstage, as a powerful statement "informed by [her] blind identity" instead of as art adapted for her remaining vision or a non-blind audience. Instead of trying to paint like she once had, using harsh outlines to rely on her remaining vision, she let go of a visually-centered experience and built something much more valuable—a declaration of how "access can be a tool for expression, creativity, and innovation" (Leland, 2022, p. 61). Her art drew from a unique perspective that only existed through her 'disability.'

This was a shared experience among the panelists. Evans, though he had been discouraged by executives in the film industry from disclosing or exploring his disabled identity, it was what ultimately influenced him to move out from behind the camera, an unorthodox practice. He works up-close with actors, allowing them to feel more seen. Hamilton discussed how her piece *Nearly Sighted: Unearthing the Dark* explored "what we lose by having sight" through creative use of AD (Leland, 2022, p. 61). When she grew inquisitive about the AD in her everyday experiences, she evaluated every aspect of what made them helpful, beautiful, and

enjoyable. AD become used not as an accommodation but as an enhancement of dance, having commissioned soloists perform repetitive movements to explore how novel descriptions for each motion gives way to new realms of experiencing the same visual feature.

Though B&LV artists like Hamilton were able to use their lived experiences to explore AD creatively, most guides utilized in daily life have been recognized as severely lacking by those it is meant to serve. As AD is often built by non-disabled professionals, it often focuses on the visual sense in a way that is unhelpful for both B&LV and non-disabled audiences. The panelists in “Ways of Not Seeing” held contrasting opinions regarding the insertion of AD in mediums largely dominated by non-blind audiences. There is an argument for taking up space and one for avoiding a redundant experience for non-blind audiences. Evans viewed AD in movies as potentially superfluous for a sighted audience and potentially difficult to integrate creatively, though one may argue that AD which is redundant for a sighted audience may not be built properly. The other artists argued for liberal use of AD both for those in the audience who may not have an enjoyable experience otherwise and for use as a tool to expand the detail-attention and general experience of other audience members.

In contrast, the artists collectively agreed with Georgina Kleege’s assertion that AD commonly used in cultural institutions is severely lacking (Leland, 2022). There is a trend of compliance to industry standards of objective, dry, and visual descriptions of art. Instead of an enhanced, emotional experience, B&LV individuals are doled out a product crafted by non-disabled people. What has the potential to be a fulfilling sensory experience falls flat as an unresponsive accommodation reminiscent of generalized, unfeeling accommodations in higher education and the built environment. As with other environmental barriers to participation, a main complaint among B&LV individuals and advocates is the lack of input from other disabled individuals who are better able to determine the experiential quality of attempted facilitators.

Museum Curators Advocating for Multisensory Experiences

In their publication *Devisualizing the Museum: From Access to Inclusion*, Dr. Alison Eardly of the University of Westminster and colleagues reviewed the history of AD to argue against tradition, instead shedding light on newer models of accessible museum experiences. They define accessibility as “the design of products, services, or environments to make them usable by disabled people” (Eardly et al., 2022, p. 151). Such a definition highlights another systemic attitude regarding disability—when products are created to be accessible, they are often sidelined as an accommodation that non-disabled people ignore as superfluous to them. Alternatively, Eardly and colleagues assert that accessibility should be approached by a “Blindness Gain” model, rather than one of deficit. This

model relies on three tenets: imaginative and multisensory experiences benefit B&LV individuals, measures of accessibility constructed by and for a B&LV population can benefit non-blind people, and “non-visual living is an art” (Eardly et al., 2022). Instead of making up for an aspect of living perceived as missing in B&LV patrons, accessible measures such as AD can offer the enrichment of guided seeing and a sensory experience to all visitors.

Eardly and colleagues discuss several models for inclusion in art, but they highlighted the program “Discovering Painting through Listening” as the current most successful for its ability to encapsulate a sensory, self-paced gallery experience. France’s Musée du quai Branly was the site of a collaboration headed by two critical disability studies experts, one of them identifying as low-vision, and the charity PERCEVOIR. The experts followed a collective approach to formulating their AD (Eardly et al., 2022). Over a three-year period, groups of creators of varying levels of vision came to the museum to formulate enriching AD with a standardized approach: a participant who self-identified as having low vision gave their first impression of a piece and the group bounced questions back and forth until a holistic description emerged where all participants felt they understood the artwork.

The authors argued this approach is ideal, as it utilizes AD as “an egalitarian artistic genre, rather than as a service provided by non-blind people to blind people” (Eardly et al., 2022, p. 160). Instead of adhering to the tradition of non-blind curators writing objective visual descriptions, this collaboration encouraged aesthetic experiences no matter a person’s visual status. Additionally, all AD components are viewable online in several different formats to elevate the program from a special accommodation to a constant of that museum for anyone to utilize—the experts provided opportunities to explore different narratives, which mirrors the typical museum experience of non-blind patrons. Listeners can choose to engage with different levels of subjective responses to paintings, including entry-level first impressions to gauge personal interest, creative detailed descriptions utilizing multisensory imagery, and historical context. This approach offers a range of ways to think about images not influenced by knowledge of their visual appearance, allowing for self-guided aesthetic experiences for B&LV listeners. According to volunteer data, non-blind visitors also experienced emotional encounters when vision was de-centered as their method of consuming art.

Ableism in St. Louis Art Museums

Presently, sensory-enriching museum experiences are lacking in St. Louis, Missouri. The AD of the St. Louis Art Museum fails to be utilized as a tool for general audiences’ enrichment, as well as for B&LV individuals. Following industry standards closely led to depictions such as Monet’s *Water Lilies* and those real cultivars which inspired his works as “vibrant,

colorful, and award-winning” (Lyle, 2023, p. 4). This example among others fails to include sensory-enriching information to craft an aesthetic and non-visual experience especially due to the lack of disabled voices behind the AD and its limited offerings being primarily in person.

An even less equipped museum lies in the heart of Washington University in St. Louis: The Kemper Art Museum. Currently, this museum has no AD, braille, or other tactile elements and only holds a limited number of large-print labels and magnifying glasses at their front desk. This renders the art inside entirely inaccessible to B&LV visitors and ill-equipped to provide general audiences with more than a strictly visual experience. Considering the University’s proximity to resources and friends such as the St. Louis School for the Blind, there are many pathways available to connect with local B&LV creators and receive feedback on future measures for accessibility. The University is proud to be integrated into the city of St. Louis and therefore must improve its programming to become accessible to all people within it.

A Model for Other St. Louis Cultural Institutions

It has proven to be feasible for other cultural institutions in St. Louis to adapt their programs for B&LV visitors and for the enrichment of general audiences. The James S. McDonnell Planetarium at the St. Louis Science Center introduced such inclusive programming seemingly ahead of its time—ocularcentrism in the museum has recently grown as a point of discussion in 2023, but Anna Green, a graduate of Johns Hopkins University’s Museum Studies program, first introduced accessible programming at the Planetarium when seeking her master’s degree in 2011. Green’s project adapted a preexisting show, intended for an early-childhood audience with strong education content, to become more accessible in any planetarium in which it is shown. The project saw the necessity of seeking B&LV input and enlisted volunteers from schools and advocacy groups for the blind, whose insight crafted a sensory-rich programming. Called *Feeling the Stars*, Green’s program included opportunities to touch a model of the planetarium’s star projector (with large-print and braille labels), plush characters from the show, special books with raised images, and iPads to bring the show closer to the eyes, if necessary (Green, 2014).

Green’s project can serve as a model for how St. Louis’ museums should embrace accessibility as an aesthetic experience and art in its own right. On one level, it was approached with the goal of discovering what needs improvement and involving the right individuals to solve it correctly. It also proved to engage all children’s attention, which provided a more enriching educational and storytelling experience. The most well-received aspect was the plush star characters, which represented different characters and colors and could be heated or cooled to “help associate texture to the temperature and color” (Green, 2014, p. 12). Additionally,

the sensory experience of tactile objects enriched the experience of those who could not visually experience colors: they were given tactile means to explore the same concepts as non-blind peers.

Discussion: Applications to the Kemper Art Museum

Washington University's Kemper Art Museum as an institution attentive to cultural diversity and inclusivity in its programming is especially equipped to follow such models of accessibility as outlined by museum experts. Located just over two miles from the McDonnell Planetarium, the resources utilized in *Feeling the Stars* should be just as accessible and available to work with the University in designing accessible programming. Additionally, the University is home to disabled students and advocates such as the student group *Ability* who may offer their voices and ideas. The Kemper Museum should focus on awareness of disability and how the perspectives of disabled individuals offer innovative ways of experiencing art to combat societal views of disability as a deficit. Additionally, models for accessibility such as outlined by Eardly and colleagues and a plethora of other experts may aid in the process of working with diverse populations to create programming such as AD for their permanent collection available in-person and online, braille labels, and other innovative tactile elements. The University as a cultural institution and a place of higher education presents a unique opportunity to expand its student and community's knowledge of accessibility and produce a memorable, novel museum experience regardless of one's disability.

Furthermore, the museum staff are acutely aware of how little attention is given to artwork when only relying on visual senses: tour guide José Garza often quotes statistics that even the most avid museumgoers typically spend less than thirty seconds gazing at each piece of art (J. Garza, personal communication, April 14, 2023). Therefore, as the museum boasts educated staff who recognize the importance of engaging patrons' minds through novel practices and an abundance of community resources, the institution can devise a one-of-a-kind art experience for St. Louis to embrace.

Conclusion

Art at Washington University in St. Louis cannot become accessible until its underlying beliefs as an institution regarding disability are addressed. As the University is reluctant to go beyond what is required by law to improve the environmental mobility of disabled students, a major factor in their daily lived experience, providing sensory-enriching programming built on an understanding of disability seems unattainable. The Department of Disability Resources claims to be student-centered, especially as the only resources disabled students utilize to file complaints

and receive accommodations. According to students, individual academic accommodations can be simple to obtain, especially when it involves direct communication with professors (Goldstein, 2023). Yet when students bring large-scale systemic issues of ableism and inaccessibility to light, Disability Resources is unequipped to advocate for the students they exist to serve, especially when the department considers its purpose as legal protection for university officials. A more apt focus and goal for Disability Resources would be improving the built physical environment and quality of life for students with disabilities through separation of art from the physical environment, as well as expanding accessibility measures for experiencing creations whose intended purpose is entirely artistic.

Additionally, the University must reconsider the ableism behind certain ideas relating art and disability: accommodations are not the place for impractical beautification or to be hidden from the public eye, and accessibility in artistic programming is not to be dismissed as an extraneous accommodation designated for a few people. So long as accessibility must be visually appealing to exist in a public space, the population at large will remain unaware of the needs of disabled students and perpetuate systemic beliefs that accessibility is superfluous for those without a visible disability. To this end, those without a disability remain unaware of the enhancement and unique experiences brought forth through a disabled identity from which they, too, would benefit.

To fulfill the University's mission for diversity and inclusion, they must recognize the lived experience of disability and what factors they have created that contribute to disability, raise disabled voices, and implement accessibility measures curated by and for those with disabilities. As of now, the University's administration and student body at large remain unmindful of their lack of inclusivity and the enhanced experiences all students could have should this inclusivity be properly addressed and implemented.

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