Audio Description as a Generative Process in Art Practice

Darrin Martin

Prologue

Audio or verbal description is the act of describing the visual elements of a work of art, be it in the form of film, television, live performance, sculpture, painting, or interdisciplinary art relying on the visual. It has been developed over the years as a method of inclusion for low vision or blind individuals. With some attention to closed captioning, I am focusing on audio description, or a variation of it, as a generative force to activate an original work of art. Simultaneously, I will be addressing how models of the above accessibility modalities make possible the entry of a wider array of audiences beyond, but including, those initially intentioned for such accommodations. I will be using historical and contemporary examples of some works of art that use audio description as core to their process. I will also be describing some of my own video installation works within the fold.

Is there a difference in the reception of this essay if you hear my voice or read the text? To hear my voice is to feel the vibration of the words as they caress your hearing parts . . . hammer, anvil, stapes into the hair cells of your cochlea. Sound vibrations are also shaped by the space of the room in which they are spoken. The words, heard audibly, caress your cheek, and if I could make them in your presence, I would have them hold your face gently in the moment that I speak. To read this text is to let the shapes and syntax on the page speak from inside your mind. If you listen to your own interiority, is it your voice that echoes these words or mine? If you have never heard my voice, it would more than likely be your own. Or is inner recognition of words on a page voiceless if not activated by a physical utterance?

What if you heard my words recorded? My presence unattainable, the words are activated through the technology of the given moment, which we may think available in perpetuity. However, we likely know better, as many of us have lived through vinyl, audio tape, film, and the never-ending formats of video production unto the current digital codecs of the day. The distance between the message recorded for you and its reception is one of historical context even if the message had only been recorded or written yesterday.

The Divide

A two-screen synchronized projected installation titled *The Divide* originated through contemplating audio description as a generative force through the performative attempt at understanding the remnants of history. It was initiated by asking a pair of identical twins, Justyn and Tracy Houston, to describe a series of stereoscopic photographs ranging from the late nineteenth century to World War I. These stereoscopic photographs were examples of the first 3D (three-dimensional) techniques,

Darrin Martin is an artist born in Catskill, New York, who currently resides in Oakland, California. His artworks engage the synesthetic qualities of perception by exploring tactile, audible, and visual phenomena through video, sculpture, and print-based installations. Influenced by his own experiences with deafness, his projects consider notions of accessibility through the use of tactility, sonic analogies, and spoken metaphors. His video works have been screened, his installations exhibited, and his solo exhibitions shown at many galleries internationally. Martin also occasionally curates video screenings and is a professor of art at University of California, Davis.

where a photographer captures a scene with two cameras about an eye-distance apart. When I recorded the twins, they took turns describing the images. I edited their exercise with the original stereoscopic images oscillating frame by frame as an attempt to simulate the 3D effect. However, because the images are made to be viewed through a stereoscopic viewer adjusted to a specific distance from your eyes, the projected oscillation generates a peculiar reaction. Simulating the 3D effect on a grander scale, one has to consider the depth of field involved, ultimately choosing what becomes three-dimensional and what becomes off-kilter in the image. In its assemblage, I adjusted between these two modes, often moving the two states around so that the background becomes three-dimensional, then foreground, to midground in varying order. The installation of *The Divide* is composed of two projections on adjoining walls that meet at a corner of the room. The corner viscerally highlights the conventional split between stereoscopic images and the process that takes place to acclimate these slightly different perspectives upon the world as a cohesive whole. Text of their words are displayed in the conventional format of closed caption underneath the speaker or upon the images they are talking over.

In post-production, I began to find moments where their subjectivity more apparently slipped into the descriptive exercise. For example, when one of the twins looked at a photograph of a pair of little girls and noted that they looked potentially impoverished, he concluded, "They look like they are enjoying themselves anyway!" However, there is nothing in the image to indicate that joy. In another photograph, in which a hunter is carrying a gun, a twin interpreted the outing as if the subjects were out hunting "prairie dogs," which populate their rural Western New York State landscape, even though the image was taken in Sweden. While they clearly understood that the stereoscopic photographs they were describing were old, they constantly struggled to bridge the gap and connect the images to their lived experiences.

The Divide installation. Photo: Darrin Martin. For a simulated excerpt see https://vimeo.com/143839300.

As Régis Debray reminds us about how we experience images: "Decoding can claim it is exhaustive, while a deciphering can only uncover layers of superimposed meaning regarding an always undecidable and ambiguous object" (1996). When recorded, the twins were not given specific instructions about what to say. They were incredibly uncertain, as revealed in their speech patterns and use of "uh," "you know," and "um." These utterances were included in the closed captions, heightening the spaces between expressed convictions. The first time I premiered the work, the gallery contained a lot of audio reverb, exacerbating the room noise already present in the original recordings. This put the audience in a space more willing to occasionally follow along with the closed captions while attempting to decipher the Houston twins' words.

Witnessing an audience move between multiple layers of watching and reading appeared to activate multiple modes of communication. Visually, the twins' interactions with each other and the stereoscopic viewers were coupled with the projections of the photographs themselves and all their shifting dimensionality. The immersive scale of the piece combined by these layers gave one the ability to shift focus, similar to the way that the 3D components of the piece would shift between foreground, midground, and background. Occasionally, there are moments where I present an image on the screen that may not be the image described but has some relationship to it. A slight slippage occurs between what is being deciphered and what is being seen, keeping the viewer engaged in the act of finding meaning themselves.

Feedback Flashback

My first experience of experimental theatre was a coproduction by the Wooster Group and Richard Foreman's Ontological Theater. The work titled "Lava" was performed at the Performance Garage in New York City in 1989. In Foreman's introduction of his play, he wrote, "There are writers who despair that a gap exists between the self and the words that come, but for me that gap is the field of all creativity—it's an ecstatic field rather than a field of despair. . . . It's the unfathomable from which everything pours forth."[1] In the play itself, Foreman's voice, as offstage director and represented by an oscilloscope, waxes poetically upon various stages of reality, while reminding the audience that language, as a form of expression, is always borrowed since the speaker did not invent it themselves. I recall an attempt to decipher the work with a handful of friends that accompanied me after the production. We pondered a two-fold problem existing between spaces in time. The first, existing between the author's words and the experience upon which he/she was attempting to capture with those words. The second, between the words finally written and their performance and/or reception by an audience. So many gaps, but this is theatre.

Simultaneously, I was being exposed to video art as a potential artistic discipline. Immediacy was one of video's most defining characteristics, especially in comparison to film, which needed to be chemically developed before playback. Through video, artists were seeking to close the gap onto which Foreman speaks. Of course, very little of the work witnessed was simulcast live. However, immediate playback and potential interactions with the screen, at the time of its recording, were characteristics taken advantage of by its practitioners. Artists such as Joan Jonas and Peter Campus utilized methods of rescanning or live mixing through blue screen technologies to generate works that put their bodies in a meta-space, flattening the area between author/artist/body and their inscription onto videotape. Artists such as Nam June Paik and Skip Sweeney helped to create video synthesizers and generated feedback loops into their audible and visual vocabulary affecting both live and prerecorded materials.

Three early video works that engage the medium of video through description, as they attempt to exploit its inherent immediate properties, are Dan Graham's *Performer/Audience/Mirror* (1975), Vito Acconci's *Undertone* (1972), and Richard Serra's *Boomerang* (1974). In *Performer/Audience/Mirror,* Graham contemplated video as a semiotic mirror and situated himself between an actual mirror and an audience in the work's recording. In roughly five-minute intervals, he shifted performed descriptions from his interpretations of his subtle bodily placement to the observations of the audience (and their perceived attitudes and positions). In the performance/tape he stated, "Looking at the audience, it seems there is a lot of amusement and gaping . . . gaping expression on some people. Other people are looking and wondering . . . twinkling in the eyes of some people, a wavering of the eyes . . ." Then, turning his back to his viewers, he continued the cycle, though this time positioning himself closer to the mirror where it is harder to decipher his gaze, he continues to describe himself. "And the hair seems a little bit disheveled, uncut done improperly, darkish. As I move back to the side I see little bits of red, uh, just a slightness of red on the skin and the pink of the ear. I see a little bit of my undershirt showing as I walk back my stomach sticks out, just a tiny amount." The audience laughed at his drawing their considerations to a seemingly awkward trait framed by the descriptive process as Graham attempted to bridge attentions. As a viewer of the tape, one is made aware of the slippage between the artist's subjective utterances and his observations of the audience included in the tape itself. Graham used verbal description to explore the potentials of intersubjectivity by blurring the lines between the subject and object through not only his words, but also the mirror and recorded event (Graham 1975).

In Vito Acconci's *Undertone*, the artist placed himself at the end of a table while the camera was at the other end, composing a triangular composition of a foreshortened table and Acconci's presence in a direct affront. While he never described his position per se, such as "I'm at a long table . . . ," he talked about what his position at the table may entail. He moved through different modes of discussing how he wanted us to respond. His hands were under the table, and he actively wanted to convince us that there was someone else under the table, perhaps making sexual advances. "I want to believe . . . I want to believe there is a girl here under the table. She is resting her forearms on my thighs," or if it is just himself, as later expressed, "I want to believe I'm doing this myself. I'm rubbing . . . I'm rubbing my thighs with my forearms," etc. When he put his hands above the table folded into each other, Acconci was always addressing the need for us to believe him or doubt him directly. In a moment of dire recognition, he directly stated, "I need you. I need you to be sitting there. Facing me. I need you to be sitting there facing me because I have to have someone to talk to. I have to know you are there facing me. So, I know someone is there to address this to."

Through different cycles of repetitive gestures that he performed for over half an hour, Acconci moved from expressing his own beliefs or disbeliefs to a desire to shape the audience's imagination. His descriptions oscillated between building up an erotic fantasy of arousal underneath the table and a description of his psychological need for us to believe or disbelieve him. Both modes are seemingly enforced by his repetitive utterances as if truth derives from innumerous reiterations. His eyes were either locked on the camera in a direct address or closed as if he was trying to convince himself of something. Whether the descriptions are based on someone actually underneath the table or something incredibly interior, neither is accessible to the viewer. While the table's underbelly was not necessarily off-screen, it is blocked by the fixed camera's vantage point as well as the limitation of any given technology to reveal the truth, as the artist presents a shifting subjectivity moving gingerly between unnerving arousal and self-delusion (Acconci 1972).

Lastly, in Richard Serra's *Boomerang,* which was originally broadcast live on a television station in Texas, artist Nancy Holt wore headphones and attempted to describe the experience of hearing her own words played back to her on a one-second delay. Holt described the activity as interfering in her thought process, dissociating the words from their meaning and context. Both her spoken and delayed words are accessible to the viewer. Early in the tape, Holt claims that she is "once removed from herself" as if words themselves were the physicality of her own embodiment. "The words become like things. I am throwing things out into the world and they are boomeranging back . . . boomeranging back . . . boomeranging back." Holt's struggle slowed her down, and her exercise was eventually interrupted by "Audio Trouble," a break in the program where these two words appear on the screen for an entire minute. The break brings Holt into thoughtful engagement with what she calls "delayed time." The videotape itself reminds us of the struggle to reflect on the immediate present as it slips away into the next moment, leaving our reflections tethered to the past. The work's original context was a live broadcast, only exacerbating the struggle (Serra 1974).

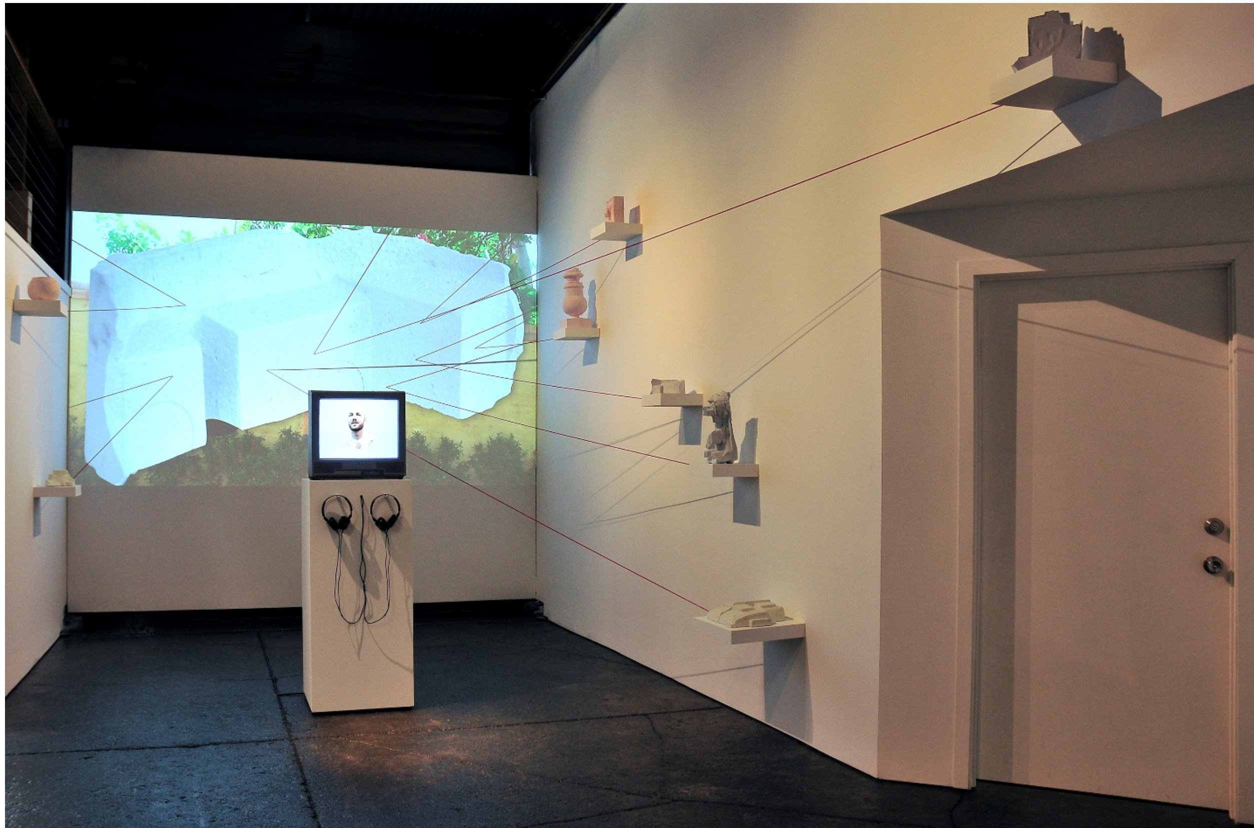
These artworks act as historical touchstones for my consideration of developing a situation that may generate a performative descriptive methodology to explore and blur "subjective" states and "objective" realities. These pieces use forms of audio description in video to complicate the idea of a singular subjectivity, and this is an element that I have been attempting to explore in my work. How does empiricism operate when intersecting with the artistic imagination? How might audio description as artistic practice trouble the binary? How might the gap in which Richard Foreman writes flatten through an improvised encounter with another medium and/or context?

The Casts

At the centre of the installation, a CRT monitor sat on a pedestal with headphones tethered to it. The projection on the back wall consisted of compositions of a swimming pool accompanied by images of the pastel plaster cast sculptures animated through the picture plane. These rather ambiguous forms sat as sculptures on shelves mounted at varying heights on the side walls. Their animated representations stop at different locations within the compositions of the back-wall projection. At the specific point in which they rest, a tethered cord emanates from the projection wall to connect to shelves holding the actual objects. In the CRT monitor, the circular images of heads of shirtless men, oscillating upon shifting pastel colour fields, fade in and out of the screen. They appear to be fondling the objects below them and off the frame while discussing what they think they are holding. Their words are closed captioned for those not wanting to wear the headphones or those with impaired hearing. On the projected wall, there are moments where all of the objects are animated, rubbing against each other, and you would hear an amplified fondling, the sounds of someone deeply caressing the objects.

The pool acted as a loose metaphor around subjective experience itself. While the architecture around the pool was hard and angular, the fluidity of the water invoked the grappling for understanding when attempting to explain something that may feel abstract or unfamiliar. The men were originally filmed in a studio situation and instructed not to look at the objects in question, and although they could have used their peripheral vision, none of them chose to. In their descriptions, they tried to figure out what the objects were by interjecting a likeness or by creating comparisons to similar things. "This is like a fire hydrant." "This was something beautiful once." "This is a piece of architecture in my hands." The men engaged in this activity projected their imaginations onto the description of the objects, sometimes using repetition as a way to crystalize their convictions: "It

could feel like the bottom of the ocean. There's this round thing up here. Yeah, sort of like the bottom of the ocean. It's the sea . . . it's the sea floor." There were also moments of witnessing pure physicality, where they were expressing observations upon the coldness, heaviness, and tactile qualities of the objects in question. The similes, occasional metaphors, and moments of physicality became the piece's driving force. Later, I was to find out about kinegliphs, which were tactile sculptural objects and models used to train veterans of World War II who lost their vision on the battlefield. Kinegliphs were used to sensitize their tactility and/or facilitate their understandings of actual spaces, though the research into them appears to have been short-lived (Anon 1946).



The Casts installation. Photo: Darrin Martin. For documentation see https://vimeo.com/173672872.

What does not get initiated in a lot of art on exhibit is direct touch. This norm is ingrained in the format of most gallery and museum displays, except for touch tours for the blind and interactive works of art. *The Casts* installation pushed broader ideas of access in another direction, soliciting a tactile engagement. Even so, audience members rarely touch anything, partially because that is expected gallery behaviour, and partially because some of the shelves are out of reach. The audience is left to live vicariously through the sensual observations of the subjects represented.

Both *The Casts* and *The Divide* present untrained performers with an improvisational task of description, while activating relationships with different forms of perception. Closed captions operated differently in the two pieces. *The Casts* uses them as a way to potentially engage with the subjects presented in the CRT monitor with or without perceiving their voice, while *The Divide* does not leave the same options. *The Divide* addresses visuality in a layered and compressed way, while *The Cast* performs a series of deconstructions between the virtual and the real; between the audible and the readable. *The Casts* also included the sounds of caressing the objects, potentially eliciting the

desire to touch. This may lead to a viewer's engagement with the space between the sound heard and imagined action of themselves participating. Meanwhile, *The Divide* suggested an opening between spaces of likeness differentiated by the slightest shifts in perception spatially while spanning gaping distances temporally through improvised photographic interpretation.

Varying Abilities

From 2001 to around 2010, I was making work informed by the experience with my sudden deafness, which was caused by a failed operation meant to fix a disease affecting my middle ears. The operation was performed on the ear that tested worse in audiology exams, with a statistic of less than 1 percent failure. My operation failed. I became entirely deaf in my right ear, acquiring tinnitus—a ghost effect often caused by trauma or loss of hearing, sounding like a series of high-pitched frequencies ringing in my head. I videotaped every audiology exam I took during those years. Influenced by science fiction, linguistics and synesthesia, these materials were at the heart of a series of artworks that included experimental short videos and multi-channel installations.

The idea of opening up to more complex understandings of subjective engagement came to me during an academic residency initiated by professors Catherine Kudlick and Susan Schweik in the fall of 2010, sponsored by the University of California Institute for the Humanities. I worked with a group of scholars from various universities in a Critical Disability Studies Faculty Research Cluster. Although the cohort gathered was not specifically focused on the arts, within the first few days of us convening, issues of access to the broader field of the arts (including fine art, theatre, dance, film, television, and music) began to take centre stage in our conversations. In many ways, the direction was ushered into shape by Georgina Kleege, a scholar whose writing on accessibility and whose engagement with a variety of creative communities through performances and museum touch tours has contributed immensely to an intersection of curatorial and scholarly fields. Throughout the quarter, the group held a series of in-person and virtual meetings. We challenged each other with readings and exercises, responding critically in discussions about representations of people with disabilities, as well as the possibilities of artworks that engage people of varying perceptual abilities.

I shared the following two blatant pop culture examples with the group to illustrate what an accessible cinematic paradigm of the above might be. Regarding critical thinking about disability representations of the blind, one could look at the official 1984 music video of Lionel Richie's *Hello* to find a blind college student being pursued romantically by her professor, played by Richie. In the video, after following her around the school and telephoning her at her house, Richie steps into an art studio where the student had sculpted a clay bust of him, supposedly "rendered" from the magical abilities of the blind. While it was not a direct likeness, a viewer would wonder how she even knew what his face looks like, since the music video did not lead us to believe they had yet had any intimate exchange. Was it from his voice? Or the superpower of echolocation rendering a likeness? Interesting to note that most comments about the video stem from the inappropriateness of a professor (Richie) stalking his student. The fact that she is blind only heightens the oddness of the scenario.[2]

For an accessible pop cultural example of a video work that could be transformative, when considering what a music video might sound like by incorporating audio description methods for the blind, one need search no further than *Total Eclipse of the Heart Literal Video Version* (DASir 2010). This hilarious use of description sung together with closed captions has cleverly appropriated the

1983 official song and video of Bonnie Tyler's *Total Eclipse of the Heart* with changed lyrics sung to describe the given video and all its surreal and melodramatic majesty. The détournement took a page from the Situationist International, as the new lyrics catalogues a mixture of camera cues and music video clichés from the 1980s, including "Close-up of some candles, and dramatically posing" and "I pull my feathered hair whenever I see floating cloth."

While these examples present a two-fold conundrum, the latter challenged our cohort to consider the potential of a collective participatory method of audio description in moving image material. We sought more improvisational alternatives to the short-lived institutional rules of audio description as prescribed by various institutions such as the Audio Description Project: An Initiative of the American Council of the Blind (2019) or the Described and Captioned Media Program funded by the U.S. Department of Education (2019). We became interested in how the act of description ultimately revealed aspects of our own subjectivity through our various biases, preferences, and abilities. We were also attentive to how the act of description slowed down our conversation and often revealed, even to the members of our group that had 20/20 vision, that we were not always seeing the same thing because our attentions were particular and varied. Many of the rules of engagement for more institutional methods of audio description are delivered with an attempt at objective coolness, no matter the content of the material being described. We were open to the fact that this "objectivity" may be an impossibility or even dehumanizing in some cases since it implies a static and essentializing subjectivity. For an illustrative example, turn on the audio description for any episode of Netflix's *Black Mirror,* a show filled with varying degrees of dystopic horror, to hear a description verbalized by the equivalent of a disaffected Siri with slight British intonations.

One of the revelatory events for me during our first week together was asking the group to describe the centrepiece of my trilogy of single-channel videos on hearing loss, *Monograph in Stereo*. While the work centres on various audiology exams, it also cuts to curious scenes of interior spaces, fragmented corners, and cropped limbs whose bodies have fallen off the frame. *Monograph in Stereo* contains a lot of image processing and colourful abstractions among a range of clearer representations. Each of the eight artists and scholars was challenged to audio describe different sections of the video. Interestingly enough, despite the amount of abstraction apparent in many of the sections, the only participants who attempted to describe the movement of colour and shape were Georgina Kleege and Catherine Kudlick, two members of our group who are blind. That led to opening up a dialogue about the abstract qualities of the video. Given that many people who are blind perceive something visually through varying degrees of difference, their abilities allowed the conversation to go beyond the recognizable representational imagery to focus on colour or movement in ways that had not been previously described but were no less present. This left me considering the difficulty those with so-called "normal" sight may have when confronted with imagery that is a mixture of abstraction and representation, in that there may be an attentive bias toward imagery depicting objects, people, and places, even if partially obscured.

To some degree, we see another example of normative vision's dependence on representation in the 2009 three-channel video installation *I See a Woman Crying (Weeping Woman)* by Dutch artist Rineke Dijkstra (2019). In this twelve-minute artwork, Dijkstra records a group of London school children at the Tate Liverpool in a typical museum education exercise of describing Pablo Picasso's 1937 painting *Weeping Woman*. The artist has chosen not to give the audience a glimpse of the painting itself, as the students gradually speculate why the woman in the painting is depicted as crying. While there are brief moments when the students express that there are various shapes and colours depicting the subject, their real focus is on why the woman could be shaken to tears, which is

nowhere indicated within the artwork itself. Funerals, weddings, and regrets swirled about their imaginations, constructing false narratives as to why she seems shattered to tears. In an unlikely turn of events, toward the end of their descriptive act, they discuss how joy could also produce tears, and perhaps the subject of the painting is ridiculously happy. However, language about compositional strategies or how abstraction is integrated into the rendering of the subject was mostly absent. Of course, the children look as if they are pre-teens, and the audience is taken more by their tangential ramblings and group dynamics than anything else. Certain boys lean comfortably on their peers, while others seem a little more isolated by the camera frame. The quieter members of the group finally offer their contributions toward the end of the exercise.

Returning to the Critical Disability Studies Cluster, we continued to work together, developing and performing what became a participatory method of audio description. We explored the idea that one could potentially work notions of access into the very inception of an artwork, rather than as something that would get added on after its completion. With a successful application to the University of California Institute for Research in the Arts (UCIRA), we reconvened at the University of California, Irvine, to continue our work, further augmenting our original cluster with other artists and graduate students for a week in June 2012.[3] The gathering, called *Art Inclusion: Disability, Design, Curation,* comprised workshops and presentations to initiate innovative methods of description, simultaneously investigating notions of access in the exhibition of all kinds of work in the broad field of the arts (sculpture, film, dance, etc.). During a session I led, I unravelled a spool of found film titled *Clouds and Precipitation* among the residency participants and had them describe their section of celluloid film in hand through whatever perceptual means available. The activity was video-documented via two-camera shoot that followed the ribbon of the film stretched out in a park. Behind each participant was a portable green screen that moved from person to person. The original film was later chroma-keyed into the documentation of its own description and shown at the end of the residency as the footage slid in and out of sync with its verbal translation.

Listening In . . .

In a subsequent installation, titled *Listening In* . . . , I further complicated this layering of video and audio description by developing the tension between multiple sensory modalities as the work spread across three screens of synchronized media. The artwork was an endeavour to activate the archives of Charles Graser, an important test subject in the development of cochlear implant technology. The cochlear implant bypasses the usual biological hearing process in profoundly deaf subjects through the insertion of a coil placed inside the inner ear of the cochlea that electronically stimulates the area. The installation was part of an exhibition titled *Silence Pressure Noise*, curated by Vicky Moufawad-Paul at the McIntosh Gallery of Western University in London, Canada. *Listening In* . . . includes an interview with Graser, animation, and processed media imagery, as well as closed captions, hand-written texts, readings of his notes by a voice actor, and translations of snippets of the above through American Sign Language (ASL).

Graser, whom I interviewed in 2013, lives in Sacramento. He has undergone over sixteen experimental operations from the early 1970s until 2010. He lost his hearing through a reaction to medicine given to him to recuperate from an accident where he was badly burnt. After a half year corresponding with Dr. William House (an American otologist, physician, inventor, and medical researcher in Los Angeles), Graser became a research subject in the development of hearing technologies. Graser and Dr. House also worked closely with Jack Urban, a mechanical engineer

who had previously worked on aerospace projects and then for Disney's automata experiments, including the talking President Lincoln in the Hall of Presidents.

Listening In . . . installation. Photo: Darrin Martin. For excerpted documentation see https://vimeo.com/258469424.

Not only did Dr. House become one of the inventors of the cochlear implant, but his House Ear Institute also further investigated techniques still considered experimental today. One is the auditory brainstem implant, which uses electronic stimulation to bypass the inner ear and activate parts of the brain that are understood to be responsible for perceiving sound. Graser underwent one of those operations, though the positive results were short-lived, and the benefits fizzled on his return home shortly after the procedure.

In all his years as a test subject, Graser would take notes he called "reports" about how he perceived sound with every new hearing device. He developed a keen sense of the technical jargon and would include observations on carrier frequency, masking, and gain. At other times, his observational writing took a more everyday tone. For example, he would write about screech sounds as a part of hearing, what choruses or bells sounded like in his church, and the voices of male actors on television being perceived through various prototypes as high-pitched. He wrote these and more eloquent letters, and it was through these records and their personal interactions that Urban and House were able to fine-tune Dr. House's invention, the cochlear implant.

Jack Urban (left), Charles Graser (centre), and Dr. William House (right). Photo: Graser Archive.

When preparing for the interview with Graser for *Listening In* . . . , I had anticipated asking him to describe his first experiences of hearing in various environments and through the procedures he underwent and the devices used. However, upon meeting him, it became apparent that many of those observations felt long ago. Instead, he immediately began telling me the story of the accident that resulted in a treatment that took his hearing and, for a brief moment, his ability to see. Eventually, he did reminisce upon moments of perceiving sounds, though interestingly, they were focused around his experiences with noise. For example, he recalled hearing interference as a result of being too close to high-tension wires and when visiting an underground power plant. These moments were evidence to him that the devices were picking up very real energies that would otherwise be imperceptible to astutely "normal" hearing individuals. The moments of obstruction were the memories he ended up gravitating toward, even if they had occurred years ago.

The installation is spread out over three synchronized screens. Two are horizontal projections of equal size. At the McIntosh Gallery, I spaced a distance between them in response to an odd architectural element of the gallery where the walls meet at a 45-degree angle, which softens the corners of the room rather than forming a cleanly abutting corner. These two projections contained independent imagery, though sometimes they were tied together with compositional elements that horizontally crossed over from one screen to the next. The third monitor was situated vertically on a tripod standing out from the wall on the right side of the projections. This monitor provided a physical presence in relation to human scale, as it stood roughly six feet tall.

The McIntosh Gallery asked me to describe *Listening In . . .* for audience members who may have low vision or blindness. This itself presented a challenge as the work is multi-layered and spreads across different screens. It was discussed how this would be used specific to the installation, considering that the work also has sound, which I did not include in the description. Besides putting it on their website, the text would be read before entering the installation for groups or individuals needing more description or wanting an augmented descriptive experience. An excerpt of this text follows:

> Section 0:00 to 3:09: The video is a constant loop, but for the sake of description, I'll begin at the section where the subject, Charles Graser, is telling the story of how he lost his hearing.
> – In this section, a headshot of Graser is framed on the left screen projection. Graser is a white male in his eighties with a full head of gray hair, nicely cut. He wears glasses and a beige-and-white patterned button-down shirt. On the right projection, the same shot of Graser in mirror image is displayed but slightly muted in tone. Daniel Sonnenfeld, a white man in his early fifties with cochlear implants and similar hair coloring as Graser, is chroma-keyed in front of this muted image. He has a goatee and wears a pink shirt. He is interpreting Graser's words using American Sign Language (ASL).
> – On the vertical monitor are 3D-simulated representations of an ear floating in space, and the object is filled with colorful noise. Closed caption text crawls through the frame at varying heights. At times, the central ASL interpreter is catching up to the narrative being told, and the left projection is disrupted with a 3D-simulated image of something being said. For example, an image of a school, foot, or car is displayed after mention in Graser's narrative.
> – At one moment, Graser talks about being on fire, and all three screens are filled with a red and orange texture. After this, the vertical image of the ear is more abstracted, layered, and grayscale. The section ends with the right projection revealing the source of the fire imagery, which is a scribbly drawing of a truck on fire rendered by one of Graser's children.

The descriptions went on for another five sections. Description may work well for many kinds of artworks, and it likely functioned for the three other pieces presented in the group exhibition in which *Listening In . . .* premiered; however, for visually dense time-based works, the task may be incredibly challenging. *Listening In . . .* may certainly be one of those works, because of its complex visual elements, continued sound collage, and its length in general.

To some degree, the attempt was quite metaphysical, as a work dealing with multiple modes of access becomes, in turn, introduced by a visual description before one enters the space of the exhibition. When I have had an opportunity to screen works in the presence of people who are blind, I have observed sighted individuals whispering in their ear more information as to what might have otherwise been missed. It is a live impromptu audio description that sometimes is only a few words to categorize missing pieces to the images before them. This experience also includes when presenting works that actually incorporate audio descriptions as the genesis of their creation, like the examples above, which leads one to several questions: How much description is too much or not enough? Can negotiating this itself be a creative act? And the largest question when considering notions of access and the arts: is any artwork 100 percent accessible to all people?

No matter the perceptual abilities of an audience, one has to consider cultural background and educational upbringing among a variety of other factors that may inform how one might understand or experience a work of art. Also, one has to consider that many artworks rely on various amounts of ambiguity as a way to curiously draw upon the audience's interests and sense of their own imaginations.

Mining the Gap

While both *The Casts* and *The Divide* used improvisational description as a generative method, *Listening In* . . . is unique in the sense that the subject's descriptions are not improvised and are in the historical record. Many of Charles Graser's archival materials used in the piece are now housed at the Smithsonian. These materials consist of "reports" to Dr. William House and Jack Urban, letters to specific people (including individuals with deafness curious about the technology), and clippings of news events and pamphlets that in some way document images of Graser for a broader audience interested in learning about cochlear implant technologies. Instead of performing for the camera, the interview with Graser was in response to questions I asked him, coupled with his own sometimes tangential remembrances.

The video animation of Graser's archive works in tandem with his words being read by a voice actor and an interpreter using American Sign Language. The combination creates a densely layered cacophony of description. The voice actor, Matthew Gottschalk, listened to the sound of Graser's interviews and tried to emulate what he might sound like as a younger man. Both the ASL interpreter and the voice actor performed with a more direct awareness of playing to an audience. In *Listening In* . . . , I explored the potential of the layering of all these materials in tandem with audible and visual noise to build a kind of surrogate presence, which combines Charles Graser's perceptual and personal experiences through my own subjective skills and interests as a media artist.

At the same time, Daniel Sonnenfeld's performance of American Sign Language (ASL) was admittedly self-conscious, given that Sonnenfeld, though born deaf, learned oralism as a child. He only learned ASL as a young adult and stated that his skills were fairly rusty, given that he had now relied on hearing through his implants for several years. The inclusion of ASL as another avenue of access was problematic in the ways in which cochlear implant technologies have, at times, become politicized among the Deaf community as a catalyst for eroding Deaf language and culture.[4] However, while making this piece, I sought the advice of people in the Deaf community as to where to turn. I became interested in working with someone with a more complex relationship to the visual language than a professional ASL interpreter. Graser himself learned very few signs as his deafness came to him much later in life, and he spent much of his energy attempting to find ways to hear again. The way ASL operated within the installation became a scenario of alternative systems activating the archive. In quite the opposite manner to institutionalized norms of audio description, sign interpretation for the Deaf is often expressive of loudness or emotional content through amplification or exaggeration of gesture. Even when the ASL interpreter in *Listening In* . . . was not very expressive, I considered him further extending the relationships with visuality, sound, and implied meaning.

The way that I worked with sound and noise in *Listening In* . . . and their relationship with images was informed by Graser's recollections coupled with my own experience of deafness. Static noises, pitched ringing frequencies, and sounds of machine oscillations whirred within and between music

and spoken words. Graser talked about how a lot of people with hearing issues complain about the noise heard through their various hearing devices. Feedback, buzzing, and excessive gain were a few of the characteristics he transcribed and navigated through in order to aspire tow greater fidelity. Many people, including myself, also suffer the additional noise generated by their own bodies, tinnitus, in competition with negotiating the attempt to hear the world around them. The visual glitch became part of the picture as a constant reminder of a lack of fidelity while initiating within the viewer an attempt to decipher what lies beyond this veil of interference. Nothing within the scope of *Listening In . . .* assured the viewer of the stability of the image.

Although I would like to consider modes of access at the inception of an artwork rather than as an afterthought, the inclusion of closed caption in this way presents a challenge. Though I am presently researching ways to include a real-time voice to text convertor in future projects, much of my work with closed caption has been post-production. Within the tediousness of the process, there are many times I feel I get a better understanding of what happened in the original shoot. While creating the captions for all the pieces above, I cannot always understand the speaker or sounds present, and in the process of re-listening attentively, my understanding shifts. In some cases, my relationship with certain sounds becomes nostalgic upon their rediscovery. For example, in the opening scene from *Monograph in Stereo*, which was shot near my mother's house, I heard a train whistle in the valley that I never hear anymore because of my changed hearing. However, as a boy, I always heard that train. In an odd way, hearing it through controlled amplitude activated a childhood reverie connected to what is no longer accessible to me.

Closed captioning and audio description have different embodied responses. Judging by observing audience engagement, some viewers may have found the layering of *Listening In . . .* overwhelming, and they would only watch a small portion and move on. The freedom of gallery viewing of media artworks often welcomes a type of flexibility that allows one to enter and exit at any given moment. While I am not in control of how an audience member moves through any installation or where they might bring their attention, I am curious about instigating the splintering of tasks in the hope that people may revisit parts of the work with the notion that they may have missed something. *Listening In . . .* may also induce a kind of dizzying effect since there was a lot to take in both visually and audibly spread across the expanse of the gallery. Art rarely induces a physiological response in a viewer. This sense of disorientation is important for me to consider the ways in which abrupt changes to one's perceptual abilities remove a person from the space of the familiar. Perhaps it is only in the attempted simulation of this altered state one may feel open enough to imagine another person's subjective embodiment, a taste of intersubjective time.

Certainly, *Listening In . . .* attempts to explore the gap between words and action, which Richard Foreman considered "the unfathomable from which everything pours forth," but what is this gap if authored by someone other than a writer or playwright? My engagement with audio description has been activated by a curiosity about trying to understand others by permitting a space for my subjects to explore perception aloud. The task frames a space for their impromptu words and imaginations. Prior works activated this inquiry through the expanse of history, as in *The Divide*, or through connecting with abstract objects that physically lie outside of the frame, as in *The Casts*. Through *Listening In . . .* , I activated an existing, well-documented engagement with description as an attempt to build a kind of co-presence of altered perspectives. Unlike the first-generation video artists, whose explorations of description were, to some degree, based on the attributes of conceptual and performance art practice in intersection with the new medium of video, I would like to consider the act of audio description in media installations and other potential modes of access through the wide

lens of disability studies. Simultaneously, I remain curious about how this lens, with its origin in the concept of inclusion, can potentially offer uniquely new experiences for a broad audience.

Notes

1. Playbill but also reiterated in Als (2009).

2. For a YouTube treat: https://youtu.be/b_ILDFp5DGA. For hilarious social commentary, see Kiernan Maletsky and Gavin Cleaver, "Lionel Richie's "Hello" is the Most Confusing Music Video of All Time," *Dallas Observer*, February 14, 2014. https://www.dallasobserver.com/music/lionel-richies-hello-is-the-most-confusing-music-video-of-all-time-7060460.

3. Additional artists brought into convene included theatre artists (Victoria Ann Lewis, Terry Galloway), dancer/choreographers (Jürg Koch), and visual artists with practices in design (Sara Hendren) and art and filmmaking (Alison O'Daniel). For the full list of graduate students and more details on the cluster and resulting residency, see Kudlick and Schweik (2014).

4. There is a lot written about this. My first exposure came in the form of the Academy Award–nominated documentary film *Sound and Fury* released in 2000.

References

Acconci, Vito. 1972. "Undertone." *Video Data Bank*. http://www.vdb.org/titles/undertone.

Als, Hilton. 2009. "Talk Talk," *New Yorker Magazine*, November 16, 2009.

American Council of the Blind. 2019. "The Audio Description Project." http://www.acb.org/adp.

Anon. 1946. "Army Blind School." *Life Magazine*, November 11, 1946, 101104.

Anon. 2019. "Description Key." *Described and Captioned Media Program.* http://www.descriptionkey.org.

Graham, Dan. 1975. "Performance/Audience/Mirror." *Video Data Bank*. http://www.vdb.org/titles/performer-audience-mirror.

DASjr. 2010. "Funny or Die, Total Eclipse of the Heart: Literal Video Version ORIGINAL." *Funny or Die*, October 22, 2010. https://www.funnyordie.com/2010/10/22/17710764/total-eclipse-of-the-heart-literal-video-version-original.

Debray, Regis. 1996. *Media Manifestos: On the Technological Transformations of Cultural Forms*. London: Verso.

Dijkstra, Rineke. 2019. *I See a Woman Crying*. Tate Gallery. Exhibition. https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-liverpool/display/rineke-dijkstra-i-see-woman-crying.

Kudlick, Catherine, and Susan Schweik. 2014. "Collision and Collusion: Artist, Academics, and Activists in Dialogue with the University of California and Critical Disability Studies." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 34 (2). http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/4251/3609.

Serra, Richard. 1974. "Boomerang." *Video Data Bank*. http://www.vdb.org/titles/boomerang.