



**"Artist", 2008**  
Artwork by Dan Perjovschi

# Disability, Curating, and the Educational Turn: The Contemporary Condition of Access in the Museum

by Amanda Cachia

The “educational turn” has successfully theorized how curators are now more and more embroiled in implementing educational strategies as part of their work in museums, departing from their more traditional and material orientations to objects. This turn might controversially suggest that those who work in the public programs and education departments of museums must, too, be considered as curators. Certainly, many museums are recognizing that it is beneficial to combine and merge the two roles of curator and educator, as witnessed by the creation of such new positions as the Curator of Public Engagement at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. If museums foresee how curators are playing a more critical role in working with their publics, rather than with objects, and if educators, too, are always already doing this kind of work, how can curators and educators work together to create meaningful and accessible experiences about disability in museums that serve a wide range of audiences? What work is currently being done and what kind of work still needs to be addressed? Certainly, disability has found a place in the museum, but why have museum education and public program departments been the instigators of actively bringing in artists with disabilities? How do invitations to do public or educational programming with artists with disabilities interface with curatorial invitations to participate in exhibitions, if at all? I am interested in how disability and access are being addressed in the museum because I identify as a curator and as a disabled person, and I continue to see a gap in curatorial practice and the educational turn that often misses the generative complexities that a disability studies framework offers art criticism, theory, and praxis.

In order to answer these complex questions, I conducted in-depth interviews with a range of people working in prominent museums across the United States in August 2014. I wanted to interview people that worked at the intersections of the following fields: (a) curating and social engagement; (b) access services and education; (c) curating and education. Within each of these matrices, I was hoping to discover where the work of disability and access might be located. In some cases, I already knew in advance that disability was the central or partial concern of a particular position and job title, whilst in others, I was hoping to find an unusual or radical stance towards disability within a department that might not otherwise consider it so deeply. So while many of the roles of the people I interviewed strive to exclusively enable people with disabilities to access cultural facilities of all types, other positions work more broadly with education-based initiatives and a plethora of community groups. One position focuses especially on socially-engaged art practices and works directly with artists. The five interviewees include Allison Agsten, Curator of Public Engagement at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles,

Georgia Krantz, former Senior Education Manager for Adult and Access Programs at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, Danielle Linzer, Director of Access and Community Programs at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, Francesca Rosenberg, Director of Community, Access, and School Programs for the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and Sarah Schultz, former Director of Education and Curator of Public Practice at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

### **“Disabling” the Educational Turn**

The educational turn has never sufficiently addressed access, or access as it applies specifically to disability and disabled audiences. In her article, “Turning,” (2008) Irit Rogoff mentions “education in terms of the places to which we have access. I understand this access as the ability to formulate one’s own questions, as opposed to simply answering those that are posed to you in the name of an open and participatory democratic process.”<sup>1</sup> Rogoff’s general (and very typical) application of the word “access” within a museum context is rooted in a philosophy premised on the visitor’s ability to participate in knowledge production. But what if we rearticulate Rogoff’s understanding of access to a more specialized and political construction, where we might think about the *equal* ability of audiences to participate in knowledge production, or more effectively, how to *enable* the equal participation of all visitors to the museum within the process of producing this knowledge?

It might be useful to first outline the existing polemics within, or to at least “disable” or dismantle, the educational turn: this will shed light on some of the outcomes from my interviews, to be discussed in detail further on. In her Introduction to the book, *It’s all Mediating: Outlining and Incorporating the Roles of Curating and Education in the Exhibition Context*, Kaija Kaitavuori argues that the labour of the curator and that of the educator might be traditionally and crudely divided by thinking about curating as caring for objects, as opposed to the role of the educator who cares for people. We might also think of the curator as the one who focuses on aesthetic outcomes rather than educational goals, and the person who focuses on scholarship rather than on service.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the curator inherits a most powerful position within the museum because the curator is considered the producer of knowledge who transmits his/her ideas through catalogue essays, didactic texts and labels, and guided tours. More often than not, the curator expects or anticipates that the educator will transmit this knowledge to the audience without “dumbing down” the quality of the initial research. Thus, what is exciting about the educational turn is that it implies that the curator is no longer the harbinger of knowledge. Their authority is now dispersed and shared with an audience, because it is the audience that interacts and engages with objects and with people in the museum who not only answer questions but also produce cultural capital, as Rogoff implies. Ideally, the curator will now also collaborate with educators to develop unique programming and services together for the benefit of a wide array of audience members.

But the source of some of the tensions that now exist between curators and educators is that while it might be trendy and even critical for the curator to adopt pedagogical practices in the work they execute in the museum so as to meet the evolving changes in society on a macro level, according to curators, it is not acceptable for the educator to suddenly become a curator. While the curator pretends to know how to organize a pedagogical experience in a museum, usually because an artist he/she is working with requests to work within this framework, the marginalized “mere” educator is skilled at producing these experiences but will never be

given equal billing or acknowledgement for helping with such a project, nor will they usually be invited to lead its development. Carmen Mörsch says, "In reflections on pedagogy currently undertaken by curators and artists, gallery education does not appear as an independent practice with its own history and controversial discourses, but is treated instead—if at all—in casual asides."<sup>3</sup> The educational turn within curatorial practice is seen as quite distinct, and still separate from, the traditional work carried out by gallery education and interpretation departments.

Such a distinction will become most obvious once I begin discussing the sensitivities and intricacies of the various positions and roles of my interviewees, who are the subject of this article. Naturally, all of this highlights the deeply embedded hierarchies between curators and educators in the museum. Mörsch advocates that gallery education must become a powerful contributor to the discourse on institutional critique, because the curator's lack of knowledge regarding pedagogy and education involves a sanctioned ignorance that only reifies their position of power in the museum, and I would have to agree with this claim. This points to not only a certain level of hypocrisy within the educational turn, but it also really suggests that the educational turn is not a "turn" at all, but rather just a "new chapter in an old book."<sup>4</sup> However, artist and Director of Adult and Academic programs at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Pablo Helguera, says that such a division between pedagogy within the curatorial world and pedagogy within the educational world should be disrupted, because both realms have an "emphasis on the embodiment of the process, on the dialogue, on the exchange, on intersubjective communication, and on human relationships."<sup>5</sup> It makes sense for these worlds to intersect.

While many educators, curators and scholars espouse the virtues of a more critical and reflexive curatorial practice, along with the newfound parallel idea of critical educational practice as articulated by Mörsch, I am left wondering where access might fit within the educational turn as it applies to disabled audiences. The educational turn has and continues to overlook the question of disability. If a turn is by nature about shifting territories, stabilities, and normative positions, this would seem perfectly compatible with the objective of creating new discourse around disability itself. If the discursive turn wants to make good on its emancipatory promises, then it needs to turn towards questions of access for the widest possible range of audiences. Even further, if an educational turn is about curators who are now expected to work with people, and employ pedagogical strategies in which to generatively activate the engagement of their museum visitors for the benefit of real social change, then surely their pedagogy might also encompass disabled audiences? Where might I find curators who are actively thinking about their disabled audiences through the framework of the educational turn, and who also work with educators to ensure their programming is effective? Helguera admits that it might be very easy for the curator who practices an educational turn to "fake it" and give lip service to how they address diversity or "multiculturalism," when in reality, their work is grounded on little substance.<sup>6</sup> If an artist comes along who just so happens to adopt pedagogical strategies in their practices, such as experiential learning, then it is through the artist that the curator might justify that they work within the rubric of the educational turn. Mörsch talks about the irony of curators who might organize an event under the guise of education, when in reality, those in attendance actually reflect and perpetuate the same interests of the curator. This reveals that the curator hasn't really given much thought into their audiences at all, which goes against the point of pedagogical practices.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, if the curator happens to end up working with an artist who is disabled, this is usually by accident rather than on purpose, and thus the curator finds him or herself forced to address disability. In

this instance, they might turn to the education or access department for advice because they admit they don't have the expertise to deal with such an issue.

Traditionally, issues of access have been housed in education departments because education departments have always been visitor-oriented. Danielle Linzer at the Whitney Museum believes that thinking about disabled audiences should be a shared responsibility, ranging from exhibition designers, web designers, security, and visitor services (and indeed, at the Whitney, all of these departments are touched by the importance of access in some shape or form), and it seems that it is the curators that have the least to do with disability and access issues in the museum. Access can find a home in many different spaces of the museum, thus I turn to the potential of the educational turn in curatorial practice, hoping critical issues pertaining to disability and access might find an exciting new outlet—a release, where disability is no longer considered a mere practical conundrum. Instead, within the educational turn, disability and access might also be treated as a cognitive and intellectual issue by curators; where access might be creatively employed by artists in order to challenge our ideas of what it means to engage with a work of art in very complex multi-sensorial ways.

I was also particularly interested in interviewing several people who inhabit positions that are very new and thus sparse in museums across North America, and these include the Curator of Public Engagement at the Hammer Museum, and the former Director of Education and Curator of Public Practice at the Walker Art Center. Like the educational turn with the imperative to instigate social change, socially engaged art has a supposedly similar focus. I believe that social practice as an evolving art genre holds much potential for artists with impairments, or for artists who identify as disabled, because it is new and can be molded according to the individual needs of the artist. Social practice is also embedded with an urgency to consider the lived experiences around us as art is called into life. While this type of artistic practice commonly has a performative, discursive, and spatial dimension, often taking place outside the traditional white walls of an art gallery or museum, it also possesses a judicial and governmental dimension as well. This is useful for the political cause of the disabled artist's integration into mainstream contemporary art discourse and life itself. We might begin to think about the myriad forms of social practices that could be transformative for the disabled identity through these interpersonal human relationships, through conference discussions, and so on. Most importantly, the typical lens of artistic analysis— aesthetics—is replaced as a methodology by how a work approaches the social, as opposed to simply what it looks like.<sup>8</sup> This characteristic seems to resonate most profoundly with the notion of complex embodiment, because the disabled artist might be given access to think beyond body politics, in order to focus on larger philosophical and political issues as they pertain to disability. Thus, I was very excited to ascertain if the curators who inhabit public practice positions in museums see the potential for how disability might become a key part of their portfolios.

### **New York State of Mind**

Disability and access issues are very well addressed at some of New York City's most major and influential museums. Francesca Rosenberg is the Director of Community, Access and School Programs and has been working in the Department of Education at MoMA for twenty years. Rosenberg was the first full-time accessibility coordinator at MoMA, but now she also oversees School Programs and Community Programs. While Rosenberg's position has grown, access programs and accessibility at the institution have been under her purview. The mandate of her

Department is engagement and thinking about MoMA's full spectrum of visitors.<sup>9</sup> Rosenberg said that even though there are higher numbers of visibly disabled visitors who frequent MoMA, there still seemed to be a lingering misperception of disability amongst some of the staff, and certainly in the public eye. Thus, it became one of Rosenberg's imperatives to ensure that disabled people were given a voice during all manner of training programs at the Museum, along with giving disabled people the opportunity to act as advisors for disability-related programming and beyond. Rosenberg is particularly proud of MoMA's programming for people with Alzheimer's disease.<sup>10</sup> They received generous funding from the MetLife Foundation starting in 2007 and were able to develop extensive offerings including programs, a book, a website, and in-person and on-line workshops. This impacted many other museums across the country and around the world. Now over one hundred museums especially target programming for people affected by Alzheimer's disease.



Meet Me: MoMA Alzheimer's Project.  
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Art, New York.

Given the size and scale of MoMA, I was especially interested in learning from Rosenberg if there were ever any instances of other departments, especially curatorial, that initiated working with artists with disabilities, or were especially focused on ideas of creative access through collaborations with Rosenberg and her team. Rosenberg felt that she couldn't speak for the curators, but that there had been a few recent examples of where disability popped up because the curators felt that the art itself merited inclusion in their exhibitions. Rosenberg recounted how former video curator Barbara London curated the group show *Soundings: A Contemporary Score* (2013), which included deaf artist Christine Sun Kim. London had never worked with a deaf artist before, and spoke with Francesca's team about how to make Sun Kim's workshop more accessible for both Sun Kim and her workshop participants through the provision of American Sign Language interpreters.

Rosenberg then discussed how Chuck Close was given a major retrospective in 1998, and given that he is a wheelchair user, this led the curators working with him to adjust their normative habits of curating in order to make his experience at the museum more accessible. The curators had consulted with Rosenberg and her colleagues for advice. Rosenberg said that while there has been significant interest in engagement and using multi-modal approaches in curatorial practice currently, the staff in the education department had already been doing this kind of work for

years. There does seem to be more curatorial interest in engagement, where curators do come to the education department and ask for advice, but that this is usually driven by artist projects and requests, rather than the other way around. In her experience, she has found that one of the biggest incentives for curators to work on disability and engagement is because of their personal encounter with a disabled person, such as the curator whose mother has dementia, or the curator who breaks their leg and must use a temporary crutch to move through the gallery space.



Artist Workshop: *A Choir of Glances* with Christine Sun Kim, November 2013. Copyright The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo by Susannah Brown.

Danielle Linzer's position at the Whitney Museum in New York encompasses community and access programs, as well as research projects about educational impact.<sup>11</sup> Her community work entails a lot of work related to the Whitney's new building project (research, outreach, programming, relationship-building), and access is one of several hats that she wears. Linzer described her job as overseeing all aspects of access and inclusion at the Whitney, including institutional compliance of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and a lot of collaboration with her colleagues in education, visitor services, and digital media to ensure access is addressed. Linzer stated that one of the most challenging parts of her job, from a philosophical perspective, was the constant challenge of making contemporary art accessible. She says that the issue of access is never resolved because there is never any one-size-fits-all solution. Linzer stated that her approach is often experimental, and given this open, dynamic process, sometimes particular strategies cannot always be effective at the service of disabled audiences. Linzer said she is always responsive to her audience, though, as often they will take evaluations from their disabled visitors to ensure her team can adapt and transform programming according to this high-quality feedback.

Similar to MoMA, the Whitney also has expertise in programming for a particular disabled audience or group, and in the Whitney's case, the Museum has long had a strong historical connection to the deaf community. Linzer reported that it started when deaf staff members led gallery tours of the exhibitions, but then eventually this evolved into the innovative and high-profile Whitney Vlog Project, as Deaf Museum educators on staff at the Whitney reported that there was very limited access to live tours in ASL.<sup>12</sup> Linzer said that culturally Deaf audi-

ences were quickly embracing technology like video sharing sites to build community, so it made sense to transition the live ASL tours into a video blog, with the same feeling and language of tours, but now within the digital medium. Hence, the vlogs are short original videos featuring Deaf Museum educators communicating in ASL, accompanied by captions in English. The vlogs focus on topics in contemporary art or exhibitions on view at the museum. The goal of these vlogs is to increase cultural opportunities for Deaf and hard of hearing audiences and create a communications laboratory to expand the ASL vocabulary of contemporary art terms. The Vlog Project has been critically recognized through awards and mentions in the *New York Times*, but Linzer is especially proud of the huge number of hits the vlogs have received (45,000 as of August 2014), and while it has been challenging to be able to track how many hard of hearing as opposed to hearing audiences are actually accessing the vlogs, Linzer believes that the high levels of traffic through the vlog is indicative of how, in reality, this technology is for everyone, deaf or not.



Videographer Pierce Jackson and art director Jeremy Lee Sanchez discuss the Whitney Vlog shoot with the assistance of an interpreter. Photo by Danielle Linzer.

Linzer noted that curators and educators collaborating over disability-based art projects happened infrequently, and when opportunities did arise, the circumstances often had surprising results. For example, when the educators recently learned that the deaf artist Joseph Grigely had been selected to participate in the 2014 Whitney Biennial, they invited him to work with their access programs and partner with schools for the deaf so he could give lectures in ASL and even participate in a vlog. He declined the invitation because he wasn't interested in addressing disability, and he also did not want that to be the lens through which people addressed his work—the reason for this, I am not sure. At other times, artists with disabilities such as Carmen Papalia and Park McArthur have worked on particular educational programmes at the Whitney, but the artists may not always address issues of disability so explicitly, as it all depends on how the artist wants to be framed, similar to Grigely's response.

Linzer acknowledges that lines are blurring more and more between the roles of the curator and the educator, which is often a topic of discussion amongst her colleagues, but despite this trend, everyone feels they need to be respectful of each other's domains, and yet simultaneously work with the needs and interests of contemporary artists, especially given the increasingly social participatory nature of

their practices. Artists might think that the educator and curator are the same, but Linzer senses that a distinction about the differences in the role between the educator and the curator is one that her colleagues still value, and that a certain territory must still be maintained about who can do what. Linzer does not consider herself a curator, because she is simply trying to foster connections between artists and audiences.



Deaf museum educator Christin Sun Kim records commentary for an upcoming vlog. Photograph by Danielle Linzer.

The final subject of my study from New York-based museums is Georgia Krantz, who is the former Senior Education Manager for Adult and Access Programs at the Guggenheim Museum.<sup>13</sup> “Access” was added to Krantz’s title in 2011 after she had been working on access across departments for four years. With the title change, she was able to work more “officially” on access matters and, of course, subsequently had much better response from her colleagues. Krantz especially introduced accessible programming through the *Mind’s Eye* program in 2008.<sup>14</sup> This program focused on the needs of low vision and blind visitors. The *Mind’s Eye* program is one that Krantz is particularly proud of, given how it evolved over the years based mainly on the feedback she received from visitors.

Krantz said that the dialogic art practices of artists were being addressed by the Guggenheim curators, but she could only think of one instance where disability and socially engaged art intersected, and this was through the work of guest artist Carmen Papalia. Even then, it was Krantz who hosted Papalia, rather than any of the museum’s curators. Papalia had developed a workshop called *The Touchy Subject: A Sensory Tour* (2013), where he provided exercises that enabled visitors to the museum to engage with the famous Frank Lloyd Wright architecture of the museum with their eyes closed.<sup>15</sup> After training with Papalia, Guggenheim educators offered participants an opportunity to engage with the art through touch, and to create a vocabulary of tactility from this experience. While it is not very common to find a disabled artist working within a mode of socially engaged art practice in the first instance, it would be interesting to see if artists who don’t necessarily identify as disabled might utilize access more creatively and conceptually in their art practices, regardless if that practice is with objects or with people.

Before Krantz’s departure from the museum, the Guggenheim launched a new mobile app, which covers the whole museum. Krantz had pushed to include

verbal description tours on the app, which she wrote and edited with a low vision and blind community member, and then recorded. The verbal descriptions for the permanent collection cover a selection of the works, and it also includes customized VoiceOver for iOS devices. Krantz acknowledges that technology is critical in order to engage a variety of disabled visitors, and like the Whitney Vlog Project, also has a way of appealing to everyone, regardless of ability/disability. For instance, the verbal descriptions are being uploaded to the Guggenheim SoundCloud account, with an explanatory text about how they were designed for people who are blind or have low vision, but are useful for anyone seeking a “closer look” at a work of art. They have had thousands of hits on the verbal descriptions on the SoundCloud account but, like with the vlog, they don’t know how many of the users are disabled.



Mind’s Eye: Art-Making Workshop with Jessica Jones, Wednesday, August 14, 2013. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Photo by Filip Wolak.

In the end, however, it is all about funding, and technology is particularly expensive, so the constant limitation or challenge for any of these museums is how to attract funding for projects that should be considered a must, instead of merely an option. Often, it will come down to the preferences of the corporate funders or the private philanthropists, and this is why programming towards one group over another can seem unequal or biased at times. Apart from attracting the interests of the funders, again, curators must also invest an interest in the topic of disability and access. Krantz commented on how she had been consulted about how best to accommodate an artist who uses a wheelchair who is participating in the upcoming exhibition entitled *Zero: Countdown to Tomorrow, 1950s-60s* (2014). It seems that unintentional encounters with disabled artists are the norm, rather than any specific intentional and political outreach.

### **Abstract Education vs. Actual Education/Abstract Disability vs. Actual Disability**

In Helguera’s book, *Education for Socially Engaged Art* (2011), he develops the term “abstract education” to distinguish between symbolic versus actual practice.<sup>16</sup> Helguera defines symbolic art as that belonging mostly within the world of representation, whereas a practice of socially engaged art is active—it is the “here-and-now” and must be critiqued and evaluated for what actually occurred. He alludes to how an “abstract education”—or a symbolic gesture like representation—might be

those projects that keep a safe distance from truly working on the ground and making a difference through their practice. Actual practice is much different according to Helguera, where the artist and especially the curator will get their hands dirty and make a more sincere effort at engagement. I use Helguera's terms to guide my thinking regarding the outcomes of my interviews with Allison Agsten and Sarah Schultz.



Carmen Papalia (above) leading *A Touchy Subject* at the Guggenheim on Saturday November 16, 2013. On the bottom, a participant closes her eyes and touches the various architectural shapes of the iconic, spiral-shaped Frank Lloyd Wright architecture of the Guggenheim, led by a guide.

Allison Agsten was initially hired as the Curator of Public Engagement and Director of Visitor Services for the Hammer Museum at UCLA in 2010.<sup>17</sup> During the interview, Agsten talked about how the world is now a different place, where social media and dialogical practices ranging from artist and curator talks and other

interactive-based events are leading the way in artistic and museum practices in the USA, and that her museum recognized the need to fuse the work of the curator with visitor services through this role, particularly the Hammer's pioneering Director, Ann Philbin. Agsten's job was one of the first of its kind in the United States, and since the time of its inception, many other museums have followed suit, having developed similar positions. Agsten acknowledged that her new job was very challenging at first because there was no template for what she was meant to do. Instead she had to figure it out for herself, and she often had to deal with attitudes from people that were characterized by puzzlement and confusion around the basis of her role. They would make comments like, "Isn't public engagement just another fancy word for education?" Indeed, Agsten admitted that, if there was ever any template for her work, it was, and is, the educators who show the curators of public engagement what to do, because they were always already doing this kind of work, even though her job was initially meant to be a hybrid of curating and visitor services, and not curating and education services.<sup>18</sup>

The Hammer Museum does not have an Education Department, but they do have an area for academic programs, given their relationship with UCLA. Agsten elaborated that she is mostly "treated like a curator," despite the confusion around the nature of her job. Agsten attends all curatorial meetings because it is vital that she is part of that dialogue in order to complete her new job well, and that she is seen as a curator on equal footing to that of her curatorial colleagues. Agsten continues to develop and refine what her role is meant to be as it applies to public engagement, and tries to remain open to new opportunities whilst also remaining firm about establishing boundaries. She insists that her role is not about marketing, nor is it about community outreach. She doesn't feel that public engagement should become an all-encompassing word for all these myriad functions in the museum. At the same time, Agsten admits that at the end of the day, the Curator of Public Engagement (not unlike other curatorial positions) is really about the cult of personality, and how the likes and dislikes of the curator themselves are what ultimately drives the nature and disposition of programming at large. Importantly, Agsten recognizes that there is a power attached to the title and role of "curator" and having that title attached to her name gives her a certain privilege and authority that she may not have been able to attain had she remained an educator of public engagement. This perhaps highlights the nature of the struggle that Agsten speaks of when she talks of how people dismissed her role as a mask for something else less lucrative, implying that she was actually dressing up as a curator, when underneath, all that is really there is a "simple" educator.

When the time came round to asking Agsten questions about her role in working with disabled artists and audiences, Agsten said she had never done so, and that disability was an issue or a topic that was typically addressed in the visitor services department of the museum. While Agsten expressed interest in exploring this area, she said she had put issues of disability and access on the backburner, and it was only upon my visit and my interview that she felt reminded that disability and access is an important matter that should become more central to her curatorial thinking in public engagement. I almost idealistically wish that Agsten's role had not been split into two in the early stages of her starting the position, because perhaps disability would not have slipped off the radar quite so much if visitor services were still under her purview.

My final interview was with the former Director of Education and Curator of Public Practice at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Sarah Schultz said that she held a dual title, and that it arose both because of the new trend in forging amalgamated roles, especially using Agsten's job title at the Hammer as a key influence,

and owing to all of the work she put into *Open Field* which started four years ago. This program was a key moment in the Center when her work became organically hybridized, and it became obvious to everyone that she was straddling both the educational and curatorial realms.<sup>19</sup> *Open Field* is one of the Walker Art Center's most recent major accomplishments. From June to August, *Open Field* transforms the Walker Art Center's big, green yard into a cultural commons.<sup>20</sup> The space is designed to explore what happens when people get together to share and exchange skills and interests, to create something new, or to delve into the unknown.



*Walker Open Field*. Photo by Cameron Wittig, Courtesy Walker Art Center.

When our conversation moved into my questioning around (and admiring of) how Schultz had managed to be both an educator and a curator so effectively, she said that she was in the rare position to have been working for the Walker for twenty-two years, and that because of her longevity and wisdom, she was a rightly respected figure at the Center, and was able to obtain a very special and unique role that she might not have been able to obtain otherwise. Part of Schultz's goal has been to change the perception and sense of value and understanding of education, and that education can also be an intellectual, creative, knowledge-producing critical practice, and not merely a service department. Schultz's personal philosophy might find a parallel in the idea of Mörsch's critical educational practice that I discussed briefly in an earlier section. There is more to education than meets the eye, and this is an important political, radical position for Schultz to take. Of course, Schultz also wanted to broaden the definitions of what it means to curate. Schultz very eloquently described how the current museum model is very much holistically about relationality, whether it be about somebody who is learning (the educator), how we get people's attention (the marketer), what we are making (the artist), what we care for (the curator) or how we entertain them (the public programmer). It made sense to Schultz to take on the dual title, given this is the direction of society as a whole, where relationships are so central in all our lives.

Despite Schultz's impressive leadership around shifting the definitions and perceptions of the educator/curator, I did appreciate how forthright she was in our interview regarding how, despite the seeming fluidity of her two combined roles, tensions remained amongst her colleagues, regarding how much she was allowed to

dip her toes into curating. Schultz might be the only person I interviewed who was attempting to put the theory of the educational turn as a utopian transformational gesture into practice, but typically, if Schultz ventured “too far” into curating, then this is when the turf battles would start and jealousies would rear their ugly head. Schultz is constantly reminded of traditional boundaries that must not be overstepped. It is only when Schultz both curated and educated simultaneously that she was left alone. It seems obvious then, that everyone has his or her own definition of what counts as ostensibly “proper” curating and what does not. When it came time to question Schultz about her exposure to and engagement with disabled audiences, Schultz said that the Walker has and does address these audiences through various more traditional programs and tours for vision impaired, blind and hearing impaired and deaf audiences. While Schultz did not actively participate in these programs herself, she did express great awe for those who worked with the Walker’s disabled visitors; she felt these staff members were very qualified and skilled at the activities they engaged in with at times what she imagined to be demanding audiences. Schultz also described access more broadly, beyond just disabled audiences, given that it is the educators’ task, after all, to make art accessible to a wide range of audiences whilst avoiding the dumbing down effect. However, I wanted to get more specific with Schultz, and move away from the Irit Rogoff-type reductive definition of access, as there is a danger in missing the political opportunity to be found in articulating the very real needs of a particular minority group within the umbrella term of access. To that end, Schultz admitted that she had not engaged with, nor thought of, how her unique role might offer a cutting edge pathway to opening up disability. I found it promising when Schultz suggested that if her now former role was to take on such exciting new questioning, she would feel the need to step back and think about the role of the museum at large, and how it might become a more compassionate institution through social change.

### **Theory & Praxis: What or Which is “Authentically” Accessible?**

All three employees whom I interviewed extensively in New York had made many similar comments about the extent to which curators in their institutions explored topics of disability and access: most of the time, this was by accident, or mere happenstance. If disability was suddenly thrust upon them, the curators were generally receptive and open to learning about a new way of thinking, but none of it was necessarily politicized, nor did these engagements fall especially into the realm of socially engaged art practice with a mandate to transform. Some of the time, even within the ostensibly real work of curatorial public engagement, the curators might have merely been pandering to artists, disabilities, and/or their social engaged practices, either separately or combined, which generally makes for an unhelpful incursion into the objectives of the educational turn. What I have proven through many of the projects described in these interviews is that these New York-based educators should be considered as curators of social engagement that are uniquely focused on disability. This suggests that this is the contemporary condition of access in the museum, and that disability is indeed a large part of the educational turn in museums and in the focus of curators. It is simply that the educators are not being acknowledged as such, owing to old-fashioned hierarchies and power struggles within the museum that continue to cause tension to varying degrees. Nor is this being acknowledged in the proliferation of critical theory based on the educational turn. There is a dis-connect between theory and praxis which is hardly surprising, and yet at one and the same time, the nature of power itself is typically reproduced in both theory and praxis.

If the educational turn was truly “turning,” and not merely reproducing a chapter in an old book, then these New York-based educators would be effectively

programming as curators with a special interest in disability and access, even though they may not agree with this. Within the context of the educational turn, and given the slippery terrain of job descriptions and shifts in museum infrastructures, it is difficult to justify and keep forcing this polarized difference between the curator and the educator. It is very hard these days to discern the true conceptual difference between the work that the curator is doing and the work that the educator is doing, only that the people who occupy these positions still remain stubbornly protective of their turf. Even though Krantz, Linzer, Rosenberg, and many others working in and outside of their departments in these large New York museums might wish to safely subscribe to Kaitavuori's terms in how she articulates the division of labour between that of the curator and the educator, I think these terms are likely to become null and void soon enough, as the museum and the art world continue to evolve.<sup>21</sup> Departments need to keep talking to one another about how to handle these shifts, and museum directors need to take charge by allocating both resources and values where it is needed most. Despite all this good work being produced by these educators as it pertains to disability, I do believe that there is still room within these New York-based museums for more creative implementations of disability, especially through curatorial departments.

Ultimately, discourses on education might be the new norm, but it is also the "norm" for the educational turn to leave disability out of the conversation. Perhaps it is time to disrupt what we might mean by "norm," given this is already the key project of disability studies. It is not that curators of social engagement or otherwise are not sympathetic or open-minded about disability, as seen through the work of Allison Agsten and Sarah Schultz, but they are generally reactive rather than pro-active, or disability is put on the backburner. The educational turn professes to focus on social transformation, but artists like Helguera call out the difference between actual education and abstract education, suggesting that while many curators are taking on education-based activities and programming in order to meet the needs of their artists and their publics, they might not have the chops to do it well. Curators would do well to collaborate more effectively with educators, particularly educators like Krantz, Linzer, and Rosenberg, who work very hard and very successfully with disabled artists and communities to great critical acclaim.

Indeed, positions like the ones that Agsten and Schultz occupy have the most potential for engaging with disabled visitors and artists most frequently and dynamically, and they need to take advantage of the unique positions they occupy, at the exciting intersection of two fields that have traditionally been very compartmentalized from one another. If museums like the Hammer and the Walker (and the Directors who work for them) are already progressive and forward-thinking, as demonstrated by the instigation and creation of these positions in the first place, then surely they would also welcome and embrace a closer critical examination and experimentation with disability, and how disability might be considered as a multi-disciplinary programming opportunity, rather than a flat, narrow category that can only ever be addressed by a visitor services department. Despite the fact that there is still a division between curators who work in ostensibly authentic models of social engagement, and educators who work with disabled audiences within what I like to think as more "authentic" work within the discourse of the educational turn, it is the curator of public engagement who offers the most opportunity for bridging these two realms, and I remain very hopeful that one or several of these museums will take the lead, and see how it might be possible for not only one individual, but (more realistically in terms of time and money) a whole department, can focus on a genuine confluence of curating, educating, access, public engagement, and visitor services. Helguera says that, "Instead of critiquing the current system, you have to

make a new system that will render the previous system superfluous or irrelevant [...] we need to build institutions, we need to be institutional.”<sup>22</sup> Building new systems would certainly move us beyond mere disability tokenism, and widen the scope of social engagement even further.

### Notes

1 Irit Rogoff. 2008. “Turning,” *e-flux journal*, Journal #0, Volume 11. Accessed 8.20.2014. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/turning/>

2 Kaija Kaitavuori, introduction to *It's all Mediating: Outlining and Incorporating the Roles of Curating and Education in the Exhibition Context*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2013.

3 Carmen Mörsch, “Alliances for Unlearning: On the Possibility of Future Collaborations Between Gallery Education and Institutions of Critique,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry*, Issue 26 (Spring 2011), pp. 5-13.

4 Kaija Kaitavuori, introduction to *It's all Mediating: Outlining and Incorporating the Roles of Curating and Education in the Exhibition Context*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2013.

5 Pablo Helguera. “Bad Education: Helen Reed interviews Pablo Helguera” in *The Pedagogical Impulse: The Living Archive*. Accessed 8.20.2014. <http://thepedagogicalimpulse.com/a-bad-education-helen-reed-interviews-pablo-helguera/>

6 Ibid.

7 Carmen Mörsch, “Alliances for Unlearning: On the Possibility of Future Collaborations Between Gallery Education and Institutions of Critique,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry*, Issue 26 (Spring 2011), pp. 5-13.

8 Nato Thompson, 2012. “Living as Form,” *Living As Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, Creative Time Books, 21.

9 Interview with Francesca Rosenberg conducted by Amanda Cachia, 30 July and 7 August 2014.

10 <http://www.moma.org/meetme/>

11 Interview with Danielle Linzer conducted by Amanda Cachia, 30 July and 7 August 2014.

12 <http://whitney.org/Education/Access/Vlogs>

13 Interview with Georgia Krantz conducted by Amanda Cachia, 30 July and 8 August 2014.

14 Georgia Krantz, “Leveling the Participatory Field: the Mind’s Eye Program at the Guggenheim Museum” in *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Volume 33, No. 3 (2013). Accessed 8.20.14. <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/3738/3277>

15 <http://www.guggenheim.org/video/the-touchy-subject> and <http://blogs.guggenheim.org/checklist/how-do-you-see-a-museum-with-your-eyes-closed/>

16 Pablo Helguera. “Bad Education: Helen Reed interviews Pablo Helguera” in *The Pedagogical Impulse: The Living Archive*. Accessed 8.20.2014. <http://thepedagogicalimpulse.com/a-bad-education-helen-reed-interviews-pablo-helguera/>

17 Interview with Allison Agsten conducted by Amanda Cachia, 12 August 2014.

18 For a more detailed report on the work achieved by Agsten, view this report: [http://machineproject.com/files/pdf/Machine\\_Project\\_Public\\_Engagement\\_Artist\\_in\\_Residence\\_Report\\_compressed.pdf](http://machineproject.com/files/pdf/Machine_Project_Public_Engagement_Artist_in_Residence_Report_compressed.pdf)

19 Interview with Sarah Schultz conducted by Amanda Cachia, Saturday 16 August 2014.

20 <http://www.walkerart.org/openfield/>

21 Kaija Kaitavuori, introduction to *It's all Mediating: Outlining and Incorporating the Roles of Curating and Education in the Exhibition Context*. Cambridge Scholars

Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2013.

22 Pablo Helguera. "Bad Education: Helen Reed interviews Pablo Helguera" in *The Pedagogical Impulse: The Living Archive*. Accessed 8.20.2014. <http://thepedagogicalimpulse.com/a-bad-education-helen-reed-interviews-pablo-helguera/>

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