Thinking of captioning an artist film?

~~A Toolkit~~

An Intervention by
Collective Text (CT)

Commissioned by
Caption Conscious Ecology (CCE)

Contents

What this is (and isn’t)

“Thinking of captioning an artist film?” is a resource for artists and organisations committed to centring Deaf and disabled audiences, and to striving towards disability justice in filmmaking.

The main thing Collective Text hopes you take away from this intervention is the importance of working directly with people who rely on captions to access artist films.

“This is NOT a how-to guide on captioning. It is a provocation for those who are beginning to think about this work, and a record of Collective Text’s disability justice-centred intervention into this discourse.”
– Sarah (CCE)

This intervention has been created from our collective understanding of concepts that will of course change over time, in response to ongoing conversations around access and community.

About us

Collective Text is run by and for artists who are disabled, Deaf, mad, neurodivergent and/or sick, as well as those with related experiences. We prioritise collaborating with people who face barriers accessing art or work in the arts.

We practise access as a creative artform. We resist the extractive labour practices normalised in arts and screen industries. We advocate for better working conditions for disabled artists and access workers.

In community with disability justice movements, CT strives for a world with what we call ‘access abundance’.

^ L. Hickman and K.Gotkin: Het Hem Amsterdam (June 2021)

Key concepts towards meaningful access

Non-disabled artists and organisations must first consider several concepts before they can create art with meaningful Deaf and disabled access. These concepts are of course also relevant to Deaf and disabled arts producers, who aren’t automatically exempt from ableism and audism.

Disability justice (DJ)

Disability justice is a framework that counters ableism as it relates to, and is compounded by, other forms of oppression. DJ is linked to anti-racism, language justice, queer and trans liberation, working class movements, and other social justice activism. Patty Berne and the queer- and POC-led performance collective, Sins Invalid, developed many of the founding ideas of DJ. Their 10 Principles of Disability Justice include commitment to intersectionality, leadership of those most impacted, anti-capitalism, interdependence, and sustainability.

Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term ‘intersectionality’ in 1989, describing it as “a metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood among conventional ways of thinking.”

^ K.Crenshaw, ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics’ (1989), University of Chicago Legal Forum, p. 149

Historically, queer Black women including Audre Lorde and bell hooks have written extensively about interlocking systems of oppression.

The social model of disability

The Social Model of Disability places the primary responsibility for inaccessibility onto structures and systems, such as building design and lack of health care. For example, the ‘problem’ is not that a person is deaf; the problem is a lack of captions and interpreters. This disabled-led way of thought counters the Medical Model, which locates lack of access in disabled people’s individual body-minds and medical conditions.

What do you mean by the word “access”?

“Access for the sake of access is not necessarily liberatory”
– Mia Mingus, Access Intimacy, Interdependence and Disability Justice, 2017

“Access is a practice, an ethos, not just a means to an end.”
– Hannah Wallis (CCE)

For Collective Text:

Access happens between people, and in dialogue with those denied access by the dominant culture.

Access is not a service that can be delivered, or something that can be ticked off in a funding report box. It's not as straightforward as providing an object or a text file. An example often used to illustrate this is that physical access to a venue does not begin and end with a ramp. In captioning, access does not begin and end with a caption track.

“Captioning is always relational – it is something that happens in conversation”
– Louise Hickman

Access means equivalence! Examples of non-equal access include cinemas presenting captioned films only one day per week, and BSL provision at arts events on a ‘by request’ basis. Would hearing people go to a film that only had a soundtrack if they requested it two weeks in advance? On a captioning level, non-equal access might mean: the captioner withholds information such as song lyrics; caption timing gives away the punchline to a joke before it happens; or, caption style has not been considered in each scene.

Access considers specific audiences and intersecting oppressions. What are the barriers for someone to attend or interact? What might access mean for single parents who live far from town? People who are shielding or cannot leave bed today? Deaf audiences who are also LGBTQIA+ and/or Muslim? Thinking broadly about access might include: step-free and lift-free access; comfortable seating; sign language interpretation and live captioning; COVID-19 protocols like masking and air purification; remote/online access; sliding scale tickets; a child care fund; relaxed screenings and quiet spaces; cultural, religious, scarcity and health considerations around food and alcohol; and accessible, gender-neutral and

individual toilets with foot-washing/ ablution provision.

Access means working within disabled timelines, at a pace that is slower, more ethical, and deeply rooted in detail. We resist churning out average material at the ableist speed of mainstream festivals and institutions. For CT, that means working at the pace of our and our collaborator's health and ill-health. It also means allowing time to ask and explore hard questions, to call in additional experts, and to review multiple drafts. Our pace demands hours of extra work organising interpreters, supporting workers, and accessing accommodations. Ideally, we find time to build access into creative practice.

There is no such thing as ‘fully accessible’. Access abundance might mean creating multiple versions for multiple audiences and providing equal access to each version. This makes it necessary to de-prioritise non-disabled audiences.

Access requires willingness to learn, and to acknowledge and cite those who came before us. It’s a process! We promise it gets easier the more you practise.

“I would much rather an artist or organisation make a mistake with an open mind, than be defensive – because that’s more emotional labour on us... That’s when I, as a deaf person, feel like, ‘What’s the point of me being in this room?’”
– Ciaran

Towards ‘integrated’ captions and meaningful interpretation

Mainstream captions

In most films and media, captions or ‘sound descriptive captions’ are text on screen that include transcription of spoken dialogue. They sometimes also label speakers, describe sounds and ways of speaking, and provide ‘translations’ of music and sound effects.

Mainstream captioners are not required to have any Deaf or disability awareness training, nor understanding of a film’s cultural or political landscape. Captions are

used by many people with varying lived experiences, including: Deaf and hard of hearing people; some neurodivergent, learning-disabled and learning-deprived people; and people whose first language differs from the language of the film.

A lot of mainstream sound description privileges hearing-centric vocabulary, and uses complicated, inaccessible language. Most mainstream and festival captions are not reviewed by sign language users or other Deaf or hard of hearing audiences. This means there is no accountability to ensure captions are accessible to the groups that rely on sound descriptive captions the most.

“If I see one more ‘synthesiser’ I’m going to explode! You know, the musical instrument that can make every other instrument? Every time I see that word in a sound descriptive caption without more detail, I’m like... (frustrated face emoji)”
– Ciaran

Mainstream captions also don’t usually consider over-stimulation, poor font contrast, small size, or a style that is not specific to the film’s content. These issues can affect all caption-users, especially neurodivergent and blind audiences. Small captions are difficult to see, and more so if the letters are, for example, dark green or not outlined in a contrasting colour. Fast-changing, overly wordy captions can

overload readers, who are also trying to follow the action.

“When it starts snowing on screen, it’s like, ‘Bye bye!’. Because if the captions are white, and the screen goes white, the captions disappear into the snow!”
– Bea

Captions should provide information not only about who is speaking but also how, such as describing speech patterns, pitch and tone where relevant. Translations of sound and music should illustrate mood and feeling in line with a film’s style and content. Many films advertised as ‘captioned’ are lacking some or all of this information, which can result in captions that are inaccurate,

culturally insensitive, creatively off-the-mark, and inaccessible to caption users.

“What we call ‘sound description’ at the moment is very lacking; hearing people have way more information than Deaf people. Even though captions give us some information, at the same time a lot of sound descriptions give us no information! I’m fed up not knowing what accent people are speaking when accent is key to the content.”
– Bea

To make matters worse, mainstream, and festival captioners are often paid per video minute regardless of a film’s complexity. This means they would have to risk their wage

to spend time describing sounds carefully and accurately. In this process, even the filmmaker has little to no say in how their work – and its carefully-designed soundtrack – is captioned.

Integrated captions

Integrated access means considering access as soon as you have an idea, and at every stage afterwards. Integrated captions are not separate from the film or artwork. They are captions that are not confined to an ‘add on’ text created after the film is complete. Integrated captions can become part of a film’s storytelling for all audiences.

Collective Text creates integrated captions by centring the experience of Deaf caption users. Our process

involves facilitating collaborations between a team of artists that includes caption consultants, trained captioners, contextual experts, producers, technicians, and filmmakers.

“CT’s collaborative process challenges me as a hearing captioner. I am constantly rubbing up against the ways in which our society forefronts hearing experience, how that is reflected in language and in the ways, I end up interpreting and describing sounds.”
– Emilia

An integrated practice means starting captioning before a film is complete, and considering captions as an essential part of production,

not just post-production or even post-post production! For CT, it can mean re-editing a piece to accommodate captions rather than following the mainstream practice of squeezing captions into an existing film, often to the detriment of meaningful access.

Successful captions are influenced by narrative and on-screen elements. Creative decisions such as how a work is filmed and edited can affect captions and access. Our integrated captioning practice sometimes involves enhancing or exceeding limitations of traditional captions. For example, sound might be translated through visual elements, animation, sign language or vibration. We think together with

makers about how captions work, and how filmmaking decisions affect and expand possibilities for creative, accessible, and fun captioning.

However, do proceed with care! It can be tempting to dive into playing around with all kinds of creative caption possibilities, which we agree is a great way to begin. But captions need to be developed in consultation with people who have lived experience of relying on captions, and also with people who have knowledge of captioning best practice and technical skills. Otherwise, artistic attempts at DIY creative captions may not meet their primary intention – accessibility.

Meaningful interpretation

Meaningful interpretation occurs when captions have real-world usefulness (and flair!) in bringing an artwork to Deaf and disabled people. It challenges the idea that captions automatically make something ‘accessible’. Meaningful interpretation can only be achieved via creative inclusion and consultancy with people who rely on interpretation.

Experimental and artist films have an even greater need for

integrated captions and meaningful interpretation. This is because their content and style might be harder to convey than that of the straightforward sit-coms and news programmes for which mainstream captioning guidelines were designed.

Meaningful interpretation means advocating for and developing captions that:

› are sensitive to the creative intentions, and the cultural and historical contexts, of a film's content;

› consider audiences and specific exhibition contexts, including access off-screen and off-site;

› can be an integral part of a creative work, not just an add-on or afterthought.

Meaningful interpretation is not just about caption content. It's about how captions are made and distributed, and it's also about how films and artworks are made and distributed! For CT, meaningful interpretation involves advocating for and creating working conditions that centre Deaf and disabled artists and access workers.

Working conditions that centre Deaf and disabled artists and access workers include, at minimum:

› production timelines that allow caption development and

collaboration without time pressure or urgency;

› budgets that allow all collaborators to be paid fairly;

› budgets and timelines that allow for access requirements specific to collaborators, including sign language interpretation.

“I would rather artists and organisations focus on doing one thing well and build on it each time, rather than cut corners on multiple ‘access tools’. I’m using quotation marks because it’s not really access when you’re cutting corners!”
– Bea

Think the work is done?

It’s not.

When Collective Text takes on a project, we ask: Access for who? What is the screening context? How far away is the audience from the screen? Will people watch on their phones? Is this a poetic film made for an exhibition installation? Is it a learning tool for a workshop? Is it a film broadcast on social media?

All of these contexts will change the way the captions are made and how they look and may even change caption content. We co-create captioning languages specific to every film we work on, while considering existing best practice.

Access is a relational practice; it's not one-size-fits-all. Even when captions have been integrated into

a film, it does not mean the work is done. Access can’t be created once and then we call it quits. Each new screening requires the spaciousness to re-work access tools for specific audiences and access needs, and distinct screening or exhibition contexts. Each screening requires us to take the time to update the captions as our language and technology changes. In a world with access abundance, captions must be considered for each screening context, again and again, with equal care.

This resource was made on invitation by CCE. Hannah Wallis and Sarah Hayden provided prompts. Four CT members responded in three conversations over six months. Then we transcribed, compiled, edited and added to this text in conversation with more CT members and access workers, over many more months! We relied on BSL interpreters, support workers, and lots of breaks.

Conversations: Ciaran Stewart, Bea Webster-Mockett, Elliot Webster-Mockett and Emilia Beatriz
Transcription: Elliot
Long form text: Bea and Emilia
Editing support: Camara Taylor
Short form edit and research: Sandra Alland

Links and resources

More on Disability Justice

Mia Mingus (blog post)
› Disability Justice is Simply Another Term for Love

Patty Berne and Sins Invalid (web page)
› What Is Disability Justice

Sins Invalid (web page)
› 10 Principles of Disability Justice

The Arc Minnesota plain language definitions (web page)
› Disability Justice Principles

More on Social Model of Disability

Shape Arts (film)
› Social Model of Disability

Caption prompts/ interventions from Deaf artists:

Alison O’Daniel (web page)
› How To Caption

Christine Sun Kim (film)
› Rewriting Closed Captions

Other Arts Access Resources

Bea Webster, Ciaran Stewart &
Emilia Beatriz and Jaipreet Virdi
(talk)
› Protest and Practice

Carolyn Lazard (guide)
› Accessibility in the Arts: Promise &
A Practice

Iaraith Ní Fheorais & Hannah Wallis
(guide)
› Access Toolkit for Artworkers

Raisa Kabir (film with integrated captions and audio description

› House Made of Tin (a socially distanced weaving performance)

Sandra Alland (essay as text, audio, BSL and plain language summaries)

› Writing From The Groin: How Non-disabled CisHet Monied White People Lock Themselves into Mediocrity

Payment and Working Conditions

Amelia and Al Lander-Cavallo (article)

› Pointers on how to pay a disabled artist and other grumpy grumps, with love from Quiplash

Disability Arts Online (guide)

› Access to Work: A Guide for the Arts and Cultural Sector

Guidelines for Paying Artists

› Scottish Artist Union

› Artist Union England Rates