

# Redefining Access to Visual Art | A literature scan on accessibility in art education

## Personal Statement

I first started thinking about accessibility in design as a student in graduate school, when our conservation expert shared an article entitled *Typography and the Aging Eye: Typeface Legibility for Older Viewers with Vision Problems*. She reminded us that the donors many of us could be working with would be ageing, and we ought to consider that in our printed materials.

Since then, I have worked to educate myself on the legal and personal burdens shouldered by those who identify as disabled. Thanks to Kate Thornhill for our early conversations on accessibility in Digital Scholarship, which led me to confront problems in the art world around accessibility. Over the past year (2018-2019) I have had to navigate my job as a newly-identified disabled person, which has been a surprisingly uncomfortable and unsatisfying process. I have yet to uncover a unified theory that will be useful to art librarians, but I hope to share the increased facility I have gained with the topics. Above all, I hope to continue learning about work being done to destigmatize disabilities, as well as to problematize art history and studio art with disability studies. As librarians, there are many ways to begin this work.

## Methodology and search terms

I searched my home library catalog, covering books, journal subscriptions, and databases.

Search terms: Art OR Art History OR Studio Art AND accessibility OR disability

Web searches: Accessibility in art history/studio art/art education

Other terms surfaced:  
Disability studies

The screenshot shows a library catalog entry for the concept 'intellectual disability'. It includes the following information:

- ID:** 300189309
- Page Link:** <http://vocab.getty.edu/page/aat/300189309>
- Record Type:** concept
- Definition:** intellectual disability (developmental concepts, health-related concepts, ... Associated Concepts (hierarchy name))
- Note:** Condition manifested by subnormal intellectual functioning that originates during the developmental period. This has multiple potential etiologies, including genetic defects and perinatal insults. Intelligence quotient (IQ) scores are commonly used to determine whether an individual has an intellectual disability. IQ scores between 70 and 79 are in the borderline range; scores below 67 are in the disabled range.
- Terms:**
  - intellectual disability (preferred, C,U,English-P,D,U,B)
  - intellectual disabilities (C,U,English,AD,U,PN)
  - developmental disability (C,U,English,UF,U,U)
  - mental retardation (C,U,LC,English,UF,U,N) ..... term is considered offensive
  - mental deficiency (C,U,English,UF,U,N) ..... term is considered offensive
  - retardation (intellectual disability) (C,U,English,UF,U,N) ..... term is considered offensive

## Terms and Definitions

**Accessibility:** the design of products, devices, services, or environments for people with disabilities.

**ADA:** The **Americans with Disabilities Act** of 1990. "The ADA is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including jobs, schools, transportation, and all public and private places that are open to the general public. The purpose of the law is to make sure that people with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities as everyone else."

The law covers Employment, which is regulated by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity commission; Public Services of the State and Government, and Public Accommodations and services Operated by Private Entities, regulated by the Department of Justice; Telecommunications, regulated by the FCC; and Miscellaneous Provisions.

Educational institutions and Museums fall under Titles II and III.

<https://adata.org/factsheet/ADA-overview>

**Universal Design:** Universal design is "the process of creating products that are accessible to people with a wide range of abilities, disabilities, and other characteristics. Universally designed products accommodate individual preferences and abilities; communicate necessary information effectively (regardless of ambient conditions or the user's sensory abilities); and can be approached, reached, manipulated, and used regardless of the individual's body size, posture, or mobility. Application of universal design principles minimizes the need for assistive technology, results in products compatible with assistive technology, and makes products more usable by everyone, not just people with disabilities.

## Issues

"Disability" is not the most useful umbrella term. How each person regards their own abilities may be a personal choice that becomes tempered by seeking their legal accommodations. **Disability Studies** and **Crip Theory** offer balance and nuance when there is little to be found in the law.

Additionally, library standards need to catch up with users. See screenshot from Getty AAT at left, showing an entry for intellectual disability, the *only* search result for disability, which labels outdated terms as offensive.

## Literature Findings

Full bibliography available through Zotero, link below, QR code at lower right.

<https://www.zotero.org/groups/2309199/accessartaris>

Conclusion: Museums are the institutions most easily surfaced as sites of innovative inclusion, in particular for low-sighted visitors. I found 7 non-scholarly articles in my search that mentioned 3-d printing initiatives at museums. One of those mentioned "sensory loss" and art more generally, but vision is the focus.

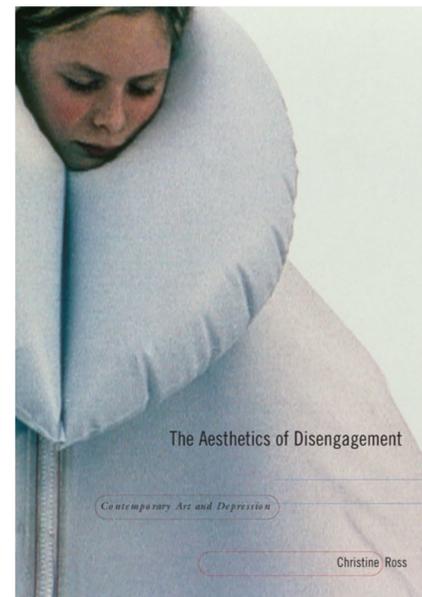
Most scholarly works were concentrated in Disability Studies Quarterly. Four articles that I reviewed again dealt with low-sighted visitors; once again, art appreciation privileges sight. However, a suite of other approaches appears in the literature, including descriptive tours, touch tours, and other 3-dimensional and tactile interpretations of two-dimensional works.

The fields of art education and disability studies are finding synergy, because of the value of art practices for children, especially, in forging their own identities.

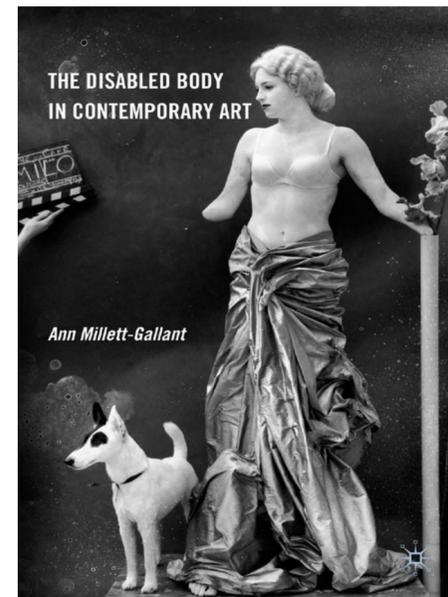
Another kind of access has surfaced in these searches: cultural and economic access to museums and education. While these issues are all linked, cultural accessibility deserves its own research.



## Suggested Reading



Ross, Christine.  
The Aesthetics of Disengagement: Contemporary Art and Depression. University of Minnesota Press, 2005.



Millett-Gallant, Ann.  
The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art. Palgrave Macmillan US, 2010.

## Digital Publishing

*Describing Visual Resources Toolkit:*  
*Describing Visual Resources for Accessibility in Arts & Humanities Publications*

This online toolkit was developed in part through a workshop at the University of Michigan Ann Arbor in December, 2016. The workshop included many librarians and especially Visual Resources Association members.

The toolkit provides invaluable resources for incorporating accessibility work into digital projects. Textual elements that are available through all reading technologies, including body, caption, alt text and long descriptions, are leveraged to describe visual elements.

<https://describingvisualresources.org/>

Elements of Universal design--practices that both assist those with limited sight or hearing, as well as casual users--are on display in digital publishing.

Questions to take forward:  
How are museums and libraries describing their images?  
How can ARLIS/NA better embrace disability studies into our work?

## Credits

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Set in Arial and Rockwell.