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*An Archaeology of Disability: A Dialogic Essay**

An Archaeology of Disability is a research station designed for the Venice Biennale, Architettura 2021 by David Gissen, Jennifer Stager, and Mantha Zarmakoupi and exhibited later at La Gipsoteca di Arte Antica of Pisa in 2022, at the Canellopoulos Museum of Athens in 2023, and at the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki in 2024. The research station works with languages and forms used by contemporary disabled people to reproduce elements—a ramp, a seat, an art gallery—from the ancient Acropolis in Athens that vanished long ago and that have little or no extant material forms. Among the many people who contributed to the research station are two performers, Christopher Tester and Pia Hargrove, who performed, respectively, the ekphrastic film and audio description *Sēmata (Signs)* (2021). The following dialogic essay draws on conversations with the curators and performers led by Brooke Holmes and Pasquale Toscano. This dialogic form surfaces some of the collaborative aspects of the research station to highlight the ways in which such collaboration brings different lenses to antiquity.

Keywords: access, American Sign Language, accommodation, classicism, community, cripistemology, Deaf, democracy, disability, disability aesthetics, disability justice, Greek Sign Language, impairment, materiality, monument

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2022, at the Canellopoulos Museum in Athens in 2023, and at the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki in 2024 (Figs. 1–2).¹ The research station experiments with a reconstruction of the Acropolis in Athens. Working with languages and forms used by contemporary disabled people, the research station reproduces elements from the ancient Athenian past. These elements vanished long ago, and although some archaeological and textual traces remain, none have any precisely known physical, visual, or material qualities. These elements include an enormous ramp from the fifth century BCE that once connected the Acropolis to the agora below, a small stone seat described by an ancient visitor to the site that offered rest, and a gallery of paintings that once stood at the top of the ramp, just before the gateway to the Acropolis.² Visitors to the research station are invited into a re-imagination



Fig. 1: *An Archaeology of Disability*, installation view, La Biennale di Venezia Architettura, Arsenale 2021. Photographed by Riccardo Banfi.

1. Gissen, Stager, and Zarmakoupi 2021, 2023. The dialogic essay above draws on conversations recorded before the research station traveled to Greece in 2023. Since that time, Giorgos Stathis has recorded a version of *Sēmata (Signs)* in Greek Sign Language, *Simata* (2023), and Orfeas Chatzidimitriou has recorded the audio description in modern Greek. *An Archaeology of Disability* is archived via a bilingual Greek-English, e-reader accessible website: <https://anarchaeologyofdisability.com>. In July 2024, the curators donated the seats designed for the exhibition to the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, where they are on view in the Kotsen Courtyard as a part of the School's permanent collection.

“Research station” is the term used by La Biennale di Venezia to describe the exhibitions installed in the Arsenale space. These curated stations present arguments in material form and draw on ongoing research by the curators. Such a naming convention recognizes curatorial practice as research.

2. Paus. 1.23.5: “There is also a stone (*lithos*), not very big but just large enough to serve as a seat for a little man” (trans. Nagy 2024). As Gissen notes, “The design emerged through an engagement with blindness and immobility, not despite these qualities” (2023: 142).



Fig. 2: *An Archaeology of Disability*, installation view, La Gipsoteca di Arte Antica, Pisa 2022. Photo courtesy of Dr. Anna Anguissola.

of this ancient gallery of paintings by way of a film-work and accompanying audio description, *Sēmata (Signs)* (2021), performed by Christopher Tester in American Sign Language (ASL) and Greek Sign Language and voiced in American English by Pia Hargrove. The ancient ramp would have made collective access possible in ways that its absence has effaced, the seat would have allowed ancient visitors to take rest after the ascent, and the gallery of paintings would have told a series of visual stories that exceed the traditional limits of the classical. While a more traditional approach to reconstruction might attempt to draw, cast, or digitally replicate imagined ancient forms, this research station takes a different approach to the recovery of these lost elements of the Acropolis. Using contemporary ideas about impairment, access, and disability aesthetics, the research station reconstructs specific elements into a variety of physical forms, as valid as any other.

After the first installation of the project in fall 2021, an invitation was extended to Brooke Holmes and Pasquale Toscano to facilitate a conversation about its realization and reception. Over the following months, they engaged in a series of conversations with participants in the project. The dialogic essay here comprises edited versions of two of the conversations that were transcribed, the first one focusing on the curators and the second on the performers. Interpretation throughout production, exhibition, and subsequent conversations in American Sign Language was provided by Pilar Marsh and Patricia Lessard and interpretation in Lingua dei Segni

Italiana was provided by Adriana Colombani and Edgarda Samaritani. While the conversations have been edited for clarity and concision, we have aimed to retain as much as possible the flow of a dialogue that, in its collaborative working-through of difficult questions around accessibility, interpretation, the past, and community, extends the work of the research station into new settings.³

DAVID GISSEN. *An Archaeology of Disability* describes our reconstructions of ancient Greek artifacts exhibited in Venice and Pisa, and “an archaeology of disability” is also our term for practices of history that position disability as a form of historical knowledge. I want to briefly compare this approach to thinking about the ancient past to the more common practice of creating what’s called “accessible heritage.”⁴ This latter term describes the way history is made available and intelligible to disabled people, often through technical accommodations.

The access elevator that was installed on the north face of the Acropolis is a good example of how practitioners of accessible heritage view the past and disability (Fig. 3).⁵ One balances the seeming authenticity of a historic site with the functional needs of contemporary disabled visitors. These disability accommodations remain aesthetically distinct from the “original site’s” physical character.

By contrast, an archaeology of disability asks how impairment provides a lens into how we preserve and how we reconstruct history. There are numerous ways



Fig. 3: *An Archaeology of Disability*, installation view of two photographs, an older access elevator and a view of the Parthenon (taken by Mantha Zarmakoupi). La Biennale di Venezia Architettura, Arsenale 2021. Photographed by Riccardo Banfi.

3. To view the film *Sēmata (Signs)* or to listen to the audio description, visit <https://semata.net>.
4. On this, see Gissen 2023: viii–x; Gissen, Stager, and Zarmakoupi 2023: 17–18.
5. On this, see Gissen 2015.

we can consider this but let me mention two. One involves identifying and reconstructing histories and artifacts within historic sites that may connect to past and/or contemporary experiences of impairment, disability, and incapacity.

In the show we paired an image of the first Acropolis access elevator with an image taken by Mantha. The photograph shows surviving fragments of the original monumental series of ramps that connected the agora (marketplace) down below with the top of the Acropolis in antiquity and that once provided entry to the space. The ramp is a provocative and largely unknown ancient structure (at least to most visitors to the site) that contrasts with the multi-stepped route used today. Finished in 1957, the multi-stepped and meandering route was designed by Dimitris Pikionis. It is often lauded for the sensitivity with which it respects the ancient ruins. We don't argue that the ancient ramps are like contemporary access ramps, but they do suggest other ways of entering the site that are relevant to its ancient form and contemporary experiences of disability.

We also think about an archaeology of disability as an aesthetic mode that involves a more open sensibility towards the physical reconstruction of the past. And that's informed by systems of representation, transmission, and communication developed by disabled people (Fig. 4). This can include sign languages, as in Christopher Tester performing in American and Greek sign languages, as well as the use of tactile aesthetics (systems of aesthetic representation developed for blind and visually impaired beholders that rely on the sense of touch). These tools typically appear as compensatory elements at historic sites—ones that are kept separate and that complement visual and auditory reconstructions and explanations of the past. In our project, these languages and systems are elevated to become either the

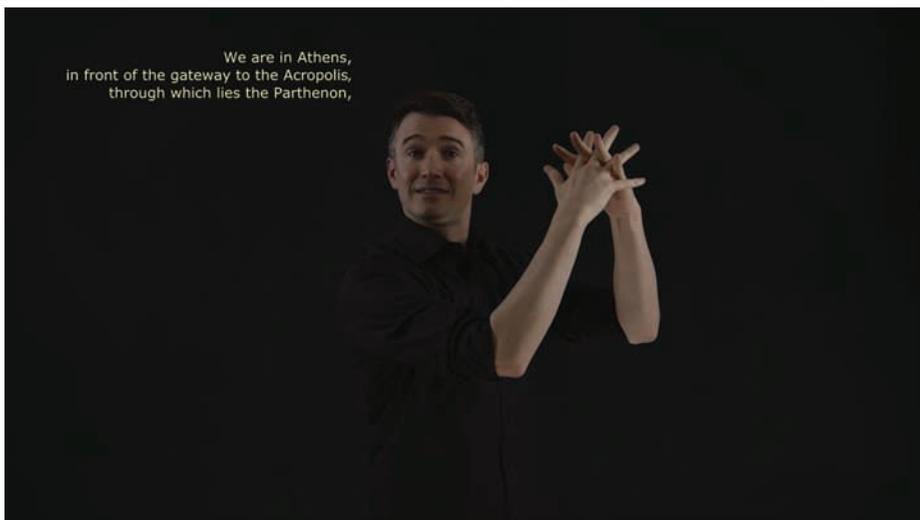


Fig. 4: Still of Christopher Tester performing *Sēmata (Signs)*. “We are in Athens, in front of the gateway to the Acropolis, through which lies the Parthenon.”

primary techniques of reconstruction or ones completely embedded and inseparable from visual reconstructions.

An archaeology of disability can be staged at any site, but the Acropolis provides an ideal entry point to these issues and for a few different reasons. The Acropolis Restoration Service has been at the center of very public debates over its accessibility strategies.⁶ Many disabled visitors have pointed out the inadequacy of the original access features, and efforts to address these problems have produced new criticisms. The recent construction of a series of smooth concrete paths has been a source of great debate, both in Greece and in international preservationist circles. The construction of these paths was a response to the inaccessibility of the Acropolis by wheelchair users, but they alter the Acropolis's hydrology and the increase in visitors that they foster intensifies physical wear on it. For those who work on topics of disability and aesthetics, Greek classical aesthetics have been a powerful focus of visual and artistic work. The engagement with ancient classicism by disabled and non-disabled artists is too extensive to fully explain here, but it includes work by Lorenza Böttner, Allison Lapper, and Marc Quinn, among others (Fig. 5). Böttner, Lapper, and Quinn confront the paradoxical ideas of physical perfection and wholeness drawn from ancient ruinous and limbless figures. I should also mention how disabled activists often confront the inherent ableism



Fig. 5: Installation view of Lorenza Böttner, *Requiem for the Norm*, with *Untitled*, 1985, and documentation of the performance *Venus de Milo*, Alabama Halle, Munich, 1987. Photo Kristine Eudey, courtesy of the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art.

6. McGreevy 2021.

within places that carry the name “acropolis” (e.g., an “acropolis of learning”). This often signifies physically elevated and inaccessible places.⁷

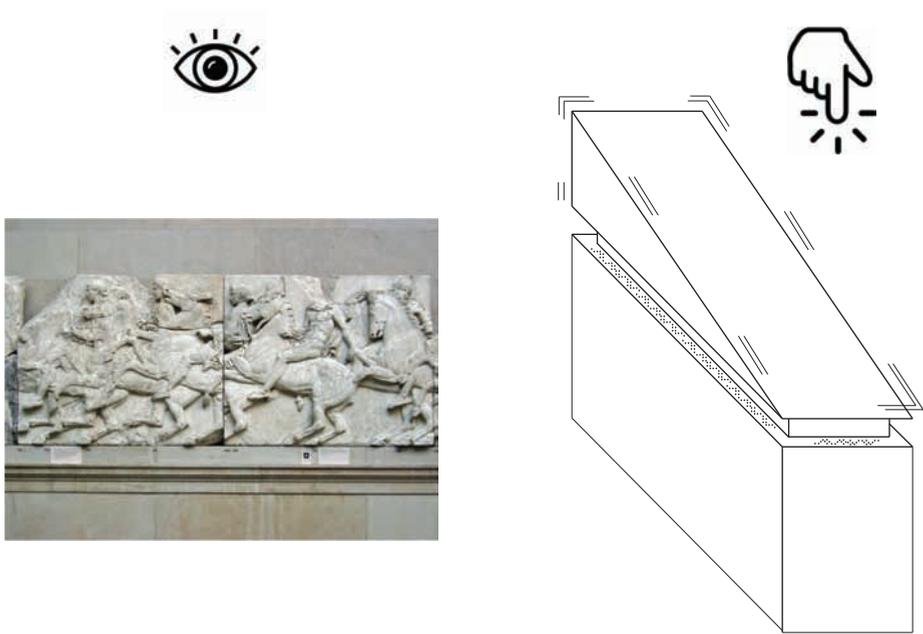
Let me move on by providing a quick overview of the context and elements of our installation *An Archaeology of Disability* (see two-page sidebar). The research station opened at the Arsenale gallery of La Biennale di Venezia in May 2021, after a one-year delay due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The installation was placed by the Biennale curators at the very beginning of the Arsenale exhibition and to the right of the main entrance to this large gallery. In this front corner of the Arsenale, we reconstructed three elements from the Acropolis: the monumental ramp, a small stone seat at the end of the ramp, whose description survives from antiquity, and a series of paintings in the picture gallery to the north side of the propylaea at the entry to the Acropolis. The ensemble of elements could be walked around and experienced individually, touched and viewed, and of course, the seats could be used as a place to rest during a visit to the Biennale.

We reconstructed the Acropolis ramp in a tactile form rather than a purely visual form (Figs. 6–7). No one really knows exactly what the ramp looked like. Visually, our ramp reconstruction appears as a very simple monolithic, wedge-like form—almost indistinguishable from its base. If a visitor touches it, the artifact



Fig. 6: *An Archaeology of Disability*, installation view of ramp, La Biennale di Venezia Architettura, Arsenale 2021. Photographed by Riccardo Banfi.

7. On the image of the amputee in classical art and disability aesthetics, see Siebers 2008. On the use of the term “acropolis” and ableism, see Dolmage 2017.



Photograph of "Panathenaic" Frieze from Parthenon--restored and displayed to emphasize its sculptural qualities.

Reconstruction of Acropolis Ramp, translating the aesthetics of crowds and movement into vibro-tactile signals.

Fig. 7: David Gissen, diagram explaining the ramp designed for *An Archaeology of Disability*, La Biennale di Venezia Architettura, Arsenale 2021.

becomes more complex: it has an unexpected tremulous character. When you touch the model, it has a slight pulsing vibration. For a visitor, this might be reminiscent of the experience of the ground shaking as crowds of people walk through any space, something that you might have experienced if you've ever watched a parade, for example. To someone who is blind, or who uses electronic prosthetics, this vibratory character will be more familiar. This type of vibration, called "vibro-tactility," is used as a tool to signal a crossing to a blind person (e.g., at a crosswalk) or, in the case of prosthetics, to signal to a wearer uneven terrain or other shifts in surface. It offers a disabled visitor a tactile pun that cannot be easily translated into a visual form. In addition to the tactile and tremulous character of the surface, a frieze of braille wraps around the top perimeter of the base, explaining the model but also invoking classical architectural ornamentation (Fig. 8).

In his description of the picture gallery just inside the propylaea, Pausanias, the travel writer active in the second century CE, mentions a stone seat. The visual appearance of this seat at the very top of the ancient ramp is entirely unknown. We reconstructed it in three different forms using Vicenzan marble (Figs. 9–11). The three different seat sizes acknowledge the uncertainty of the seat's original shape while providing visitors with options relevant to their differing needs. One seat is tall and narrow,

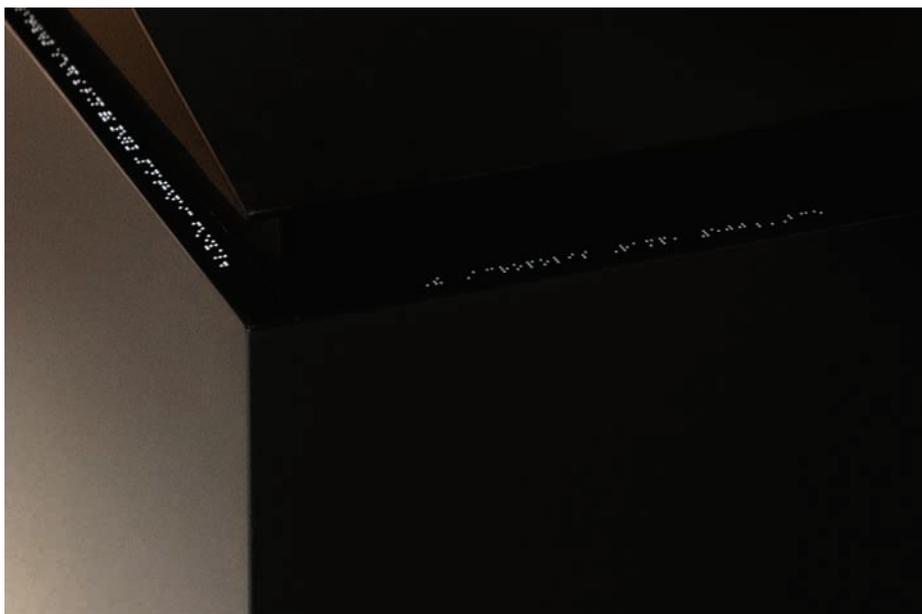


Fig. 8: Detail of braille frieze, *An Archaeology of Disability*, La Biennale di Venezia Architettura, Arsenale 2021. Photographed by Riccardo Banfi.



Fig. 9: Installation view, person seated on one of three seats with patterned drill holes, marble, *An Archaeology of Disability*, La Biennale di Venezia Architettura, Arsenale 2021. May 2021. Photographed by Mantha Zarmakoupi.



Fig. 10: Detail, seat with patterned drill holes, marble, *An Archaeology of Disability*, La Biennale di Venezia Architettura, Arsenale 2021. Photographed by Riccardo Banfi.

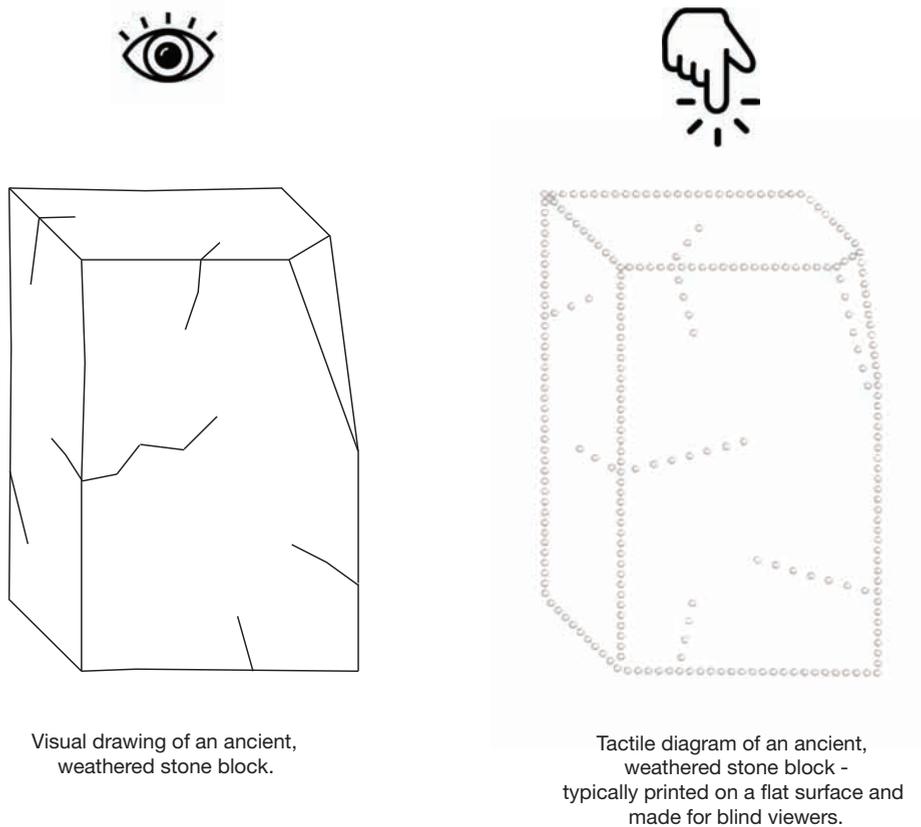


Fig. 11: David Gissen, diagram of seat process, *An Archaeology of Disability*.

while another is lower and wider. Each stone seat contains a tactile rustication pattern made of small holes, inspired by the types of tactile graphics that are made for blind beholders of art.⁸ These tactile rustication patterns typically stand apart from original works on tactile access panels. Here, they are embedded into the objects themselves and they're meant to evoke the kind of weathering and cracking of ancient stone, but in a form that would be familiar to a contemporary blind beholder.

And finally, the paintings that once hung in the picture gallery inside the gate structure we reconstructed as a performance in American and Greek sign languages by Christopher Tester and an audio description of the same script performed by Pia Hargrove (Figs. 12–13). This will be explained more extensively by Jennifer.

8. On tactile graphics, see *Tactile Graphics*, <https://www.tactilegraphics.org/whataretgs.html>; Kleege 2017: 64: "I was making the point that while the eye seeks the outline of the object, the hand does not. The hand embraces the object in its multifaceted complexity." On producing the seats, see Gissen 2023: 141–42.



Fig. 12: Still of *Sēmata (Signs)*, with Christopher Tester performing a painting of Medusa and Perseus, *An Archaeology of Disability*, La Biennale di Venezia Architettura, Arsenale 2021.

BROOKE HOLMES. One of the remarkable things about the project is the sense of collaboration and community that it generates. So, for example, the tremulous surface of the ramp communicates the collective movement of bodies. There's a moment in the film when Christopher and Pia extend an invitation to the viewer to sit, which brings the visitor into the community (Fig. 14). So this project is quite incredible in how it invites us to think about community-building at the site. It's also a project that involves so many different collaborators and different forms of knowledge. So we wanted to start by asking you about how you imagined the process of collaboration and its feedback loops. As you got into the project, how did the conversations produce new ways forward?

JENNIFER STAGER. I like that image of the feedback loops. We did end up working across many different collaborative spaces, not all of which we were each present in at the same time, but these smaller collaborations fed through the collective process of the project itself. I wrote the script for *Sēmata (Signs)* in Baltimore in consultation with David and Mantha, beginning with Pausanias and his second-century CE account of the small rock and the picture gallery in the gateway to the Acropolis (Paus. 1.22.5–8). In his documentary account, Pausanias mentions the subjects of selected paintings in the gallery but does not offer a thick description of them. By contrast, contemporary writers such as the Syrian writer Lucian crafted vivid images of imagined artworks through language (ekphrasis). I wanted to bring



Fig. 13: Pia Hargrove standing in front of the Baltimore Museum of Art, spring 2022.
Photographed by Jennifer Stager.

together the documentary and the rhetorical and to invite each of the performers to take on the role of an orator. To build these vivid descriptions for them to perform I worked from the subjects of the paintings mentioned by Pausanias, representations



Fig. 14: Installation view, Christopher Tester performing invitation to sit on the rock, La Biennale di Venezia Architettura, Arsenale 2021. Photographed by Riccardo Banfi.

of those subjects in other visual media and texts, and Saidiya Hartman’s methodology of critical fabulation.⁹

Hartman developed her methodology writing into archival gaps of the histories of the transatlantic slave trade. Deploying critical fabulation in the very different context of the Athenian Acropolis, a site around which considerable archives have been built up, allows us to write against received stories about this site and to write into imagination lost pictures of gender-based violence and divinely supercharged erotics that this picture gallery once held up to ancient beholders. Merging critical fabulation and ekphrasis, the performers offer up new pictures of (art) history through their sign language and audio performances.¹⁰

9. Hartman 2008: 1–14. Hartman describes this method as follows: “The method guiding this writing practice is best described as critical fabulation. ‘Fabula’ denotes the basic elements of story, the building blocks of the narrative. . . . By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done” (11).

10. The choice to perform the script in American and Greek sign languages does not claim an ancient sign language in use by ancient orators who performed ekphrases publicly, but instead claims that sign languages are equally valid languages of translation. However, in the context of the challenges of communication between speakers of many different language, the Syrian writer Lucian

Working from the same script, but in different languages with different temporalities, the two performers guide the audience through a selection of these lost paintings. To mark the distinction between these two performances in the research station, the film-work plays on a loop from an easel-like monitor while the audio description can be accessed on the web via a QR code.¹¹

When I asked Christopher if he would perform in the film, I thought he was living in New York, where he has performed with Deaf Broadway.¹² It turned out that he was abroad completing his dissertation and had just moved to Berlin to finish writing in community with other creatives.¹³ Filming took place during the pandemic and to produce it, Christopher performed in person at a shared film warehouse in Berlin with the ClearCut Films team and I joined by Zoom along with Carolyn Cerilli, who was then an undergraduate at Johns Hopkins, Sasha Kobow, who had facilitated the film crew connection and who joined from Sicily, and Pilar Marsh, an ASL interpreter who joined from San Francisco (Fig. 15).¹⁴ Pia Hargrove recorded the audio description from her home studio in Brooklyn, and this was another loop between the two of us (Fig. 16). After filming and recording, I worked with several people to hand-place the open captions onto the film, and captioning had its own kind of loop. Brian Cole, an information technologist at Hopkins, helped me to take the transcript of Pia's audio description and to stretch out its timing to align with the different temporality of Christopher's performance in American and Greek sign languages in order to get time stamps for each caption.¹⁵ The different timings between sign languages and spoken English point to the acts of translation that operate between the film-work and its audio description, but also to the loops of communication active in its production. After we had mapped out the time

wrote a comedic exchange between the gods Hermes and Zeus (13.6–9) in *Zeus Rants*. In this dialogue, Hermes describes himself as “not a polyglot” (13.7) and decides that to communicate with the Scythians, Persians, Thracians, and Celts gathered at the assembly, he will need “to sign with [his] hand” (13.8–9, trans. Harmon). Hermes' solution suggests that the idea of speaking with one's hands would have been familiar to Lucian's audience and a possible means of communicating.

11. See n.3 above.

12. <https://www.deafbroadway.com>, accessed 3 Sept. 2022.

13. “Friends Who Share a Language,” *New York Times*, 12 April 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/12/t-magazine/sign-language-friends.html>.

14. Clear Cut Films Berlin: <https://clearcutfilms.de>; Kobow 2007.

15. The process for open-captioning *Sēmata (Signs)* differed from open- or closed-captioning a film with audio. Open captions are placed on the film and, unlike closed captions, cannot be turned on and off. Christopher Tester performed in American and Greek sign languages, having translated and interpreted from a script written in American English (see Christopher's discussion of this below). In order to produce the open captions, we worked from a transcript of Pia Hargrove's audio description that we had lengthened (thus distorting its sound) to match the temporality of Christopher's sign language performance. We then checked the timing of the captions with Pilar Marsh and Caroline Cerrilli. Pilar, who is an ASL interpreter and had interpreted for the film production, noted that she could only assess the ASL since she does not know Greek Sign Language. On timing and the business of closed-captioning, see Healey 2022. The essay opens with a still from C. S. Kim, “Close Readings,” *Pop-Up Magazine*, 2022, <https://youtu.be/tfe479qL8hg>.

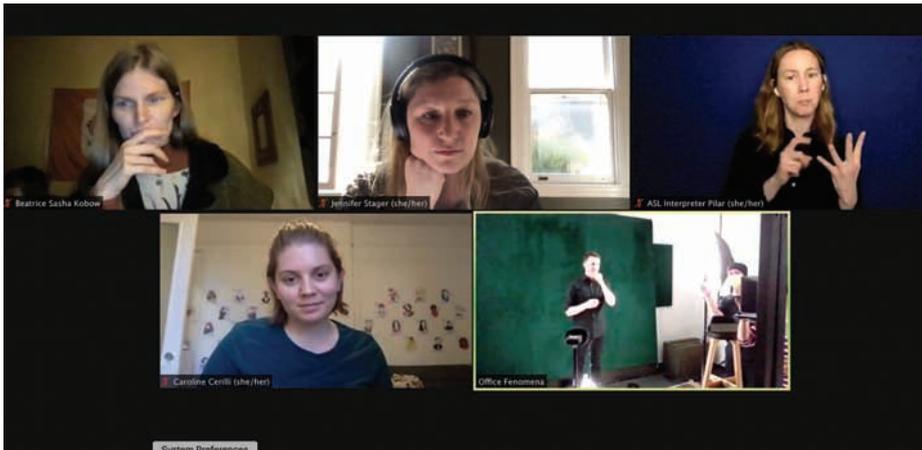


Fig. 15: Still of film production of *Sēmata* (*Signs*), Baltimore, Berlin, San Francisco, Sicily, March 2021.



Fig. 16: Pia Hargrove in her home recording studio, Brooklyn, N.Y., March 2021. Photographed by Pia Hargrove.

stamps down to the millisecond, Dennis Lyons from ClearCut Films worked with me to hand-place the open captions, trading the film back and forth around the clock for a few days between Berlin and Baltimore. Finally, Caroline Cerilli and Pilar Marsh both checked the caption work just before we sent it to Venice.

Meanwhile David, Mantha, and I were meeting regularly online, and each of us had our own set of connections.

MANTHA ZARMAKOUPÍ. The collaborative project developed over much more time than we had envisioned at the beginning because it was supposed to be presented at the Biennale of 2020, which was postponed to 2021, coinciding with the creation of a new path around the Acropolis to facilitate access which opened to the public in March 2021. International debates over these access interventions unfolded just as the delayed Biennale opened.¹⁶ And this meant that our research station overlapped with this moment of intense global thinking about the accessibility and historicity of the Acropolis, questions about disability access to the Acropolis as well as the site's historic value, which culminated at an international meeting in November 2021 organized by the Acropolis Restoration Service and the Committee for the Conservation of the Acropolis Monuments.¹⁷ While our project pursued a different mode of engaging with the Acropolis—exploring parts of the site through the forms and languages of contemporary disability—staff and guests at the Biennale as well as colleagues in the field of ancient Greek studies certainly came to the project with these recent interventions in mind.

DG. The issue of collaboration and community within the project is central to it. Hashim Sarkis, who was the curator of the 2020 Architecture Biennale, invited me to propose an installation about disability and architecture history and research. I knew that I wanted to stage something about how the Biennale experience could be made more hospitable for disabled visitors. The inaccessibility and physical intensity of the Biennale is something I experienced firsthand as a disabled visitor and previous participant in it.

At the time of my conversations with Hashim and his team there was an uproar in the US architecture press around Donald Trump's desire to create rules that would enshrine classical architecture for future US Federal buildings.¹⁸ Trump's aesthetic advisors positioned classical architecture as fundamental to governance, beauty, and US history. As mentioned earlier, disabled people have often wrestled with the aesthetic and physical characteristics imagined as endemic to classical aesthetics. This is one of many critiques of classicism, including racial critiques of neoclassical aesthetics. I am not a classical art historian or archaeologist, but

16. See, for example, Gratsia 2021.

17. The 7th International Meeting for the Restoration of the Acropolis Monuments, Acropolis Museum, Athens, 11–13 Nov. 2021.

18. Executive Office of the President, "Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture," Executive Order 13967, 18 Dec. 2020, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/12/23/2020-28605/promoting-beautiful-federal-civic-architecture>.

I am very familiar with disability critiques of classicism. I thought we could engage this topic for this exhibition and it intrigued the curators. I thought it would be exciting to work collaboratively with Jennifer and Mantha. Jennifer has explored how polychromatic reconstructions of ancient Greek and Roman art can intervene in contemporary discussions of art, gender, race, and politics. It was that type of provocation that I wanted to stage, and her ability to connect her research to broader audiences was also important in this context. Mantha was trained as an architect, so she understood the audience and ultimate intent of the architectural edition of the Biennale. Additionally, as a Greek archaeologist, Mantha provided important insights into the contemporary protests in Athens over access and a deep understanding of historic and ongoing archaeological debates at the Acropolis. While we were the original participants, many different people helped us on this project from stone masons to carpenters to our installation architect Alessandro Borgomainerio (Fig. 17). And then in Pisa with Anna Anguissola and her staff. It has really been a collaborative process through the entire project.

As for other types of community, the theme of the Biennale was *How will we live together?*, which was initially intended in 2019 and 2020 as a comment about the global resurgence of right-wing politics and trying to reimagine forms



Fig. 17: Installation in progress, La Biennale di Venezia Architettura, Arsenale 2021.

of community.¹⁹ With the pandemic, the meaning of *How will we live together?* completely changed for the Biennale and it was about how people can occupy the same space together! In tandem with this shift in meaning, our project shifted a bit from a sole focus on the problems of classicism and disability to staging some kind of collective experience of repose and rest for people within the space of the exhibition itself.

Our project introduced things like touch and tactility and sitting together that ran counter to experiences of isolation during the pandemic. It's important to mention that these things also ran counter to the desires of the Biennale organizers in Venice. We had a bit of a back-and-forth with the organizers regarding the proximity of people to each other in our seating area and the tactile elements of the exhibition. Originally, tactility was discouraged due to hygiene concerns, and the idea of collective tactile elements was forbidden. But we made an argument that the project could not be accessible without these features. In the end, I think we not only created something that intervenes in classical aesthetics, but also provided a moment for visitors to rest and for disabled visitors to feel represented in the Biennale. I have heard from colleagues who visited the exhibition that they appreciated the seats, in particular. These were the only seats available in this large room in the Arsenale. The seats were also very cooling due to our use of solid stone. I hope our approach informs future practices within the Biennale.

JS. I want to add to what David said about the different people who worked with us over time and may continue in its futures. For me, that's also really evocative of the kinds of collaborations in antiquity that also sometimes get erased by the type of evidence that we elevate and analyze versus the type of evidence that may be more ephemeral. The many collaborations that produced *An Archaeology of Disability* highlight the possibility of past collaborations.

Brooke and Pasquale, perhaps you wish to respond to the question you posed since collaboration is a big part of your own processes. Pasquale, I just read your really great essay, "The Way History Lands on a Face," co-authored with Brandi Bushman.²⁰ And Brooke, collaboration seems to be an important part of many of your projects, including *Postclassicisms* and *Liquid Antiquity*.²¹

19. Sarkis 2021.

20. Bushman and Toscano 2022.

21. Postclassicisms Collective 2020 and www.postclassicisms.org. *Liquid Antiquity* (Holmes and Marta 2017), commissioned by the DESTÉ Foundation for Contemporary Art, was conceived by Brooke Holmes in collaboration with Polina Kosmadaki and Yorgos Tzirtzilakis. The installation "Liquid Antiquity: Conversations," conceived and designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro, was exhibited at the Benaki Museum from April 4–September 17, 2017, before traveling to appear in *The Classical Now*, curated by Michael Squire, James Cahill, and Ruth Allen, at King's College London (March 2–April 18, 2018).

PASQUALE TOSCANO. I think collaboration militates against this idea that we are sort of individualized, siloed subjects and that our abilities are sufficient to manage strenuous tasks of, say, writing a scholarly article or making it to the top of the Acropolis. And you all have talked about how in the nineteenth century there's a shift to sort of a romantic view of tourism as one that involves a kind of solitary genius marching forward in a standardized temporality to this kind of site, this monumental site of pilgrimage. And that model is one that I think still very much exists within the academy, too, although it's now more common, thankfully, to see co-authored articles in the humanities; certainly that's a frequent model in the sciences. But the great thing about collaboration is that it brings into stark relief the fact that you can't do this work alone, just as you can't climb to the Acropolis alone. And this is especially important when you're doing intersectional work. For example, that essay that you mentioned on disability and Indigeneity I wrote with Brandi Bushman, an Indigenous friend in my PhD cohort, and we both brought our own perspectives to the challenges of working at the intersection of disability and Indigeneity.

BH. This discussion is a reminder that collaborations start with relations that occur between people that then give rise to conceptual relations, and these create interactions that can't be predicted in advance. It's really magical in a way. I'm fascinated by the idea of sympathy in the ancient sense of cosmological *sympatheia*.²² I think about collaboration in terms of nonlinear movement expanding outwards, where you have the sense of existing in a space around which you can move in different ways.

I also wanted to echo what Pasquale said that, particularly in the humanities and in the arts, we still prioritize the single author. Yet collaboration is so much work. So much time, labor, care, and support goes into developing the relations between collaborators, and this work is often not surfaced. There's this fallacy that if there's one co-authored paper, each author has 50 percent of the authorship. In fact, in the collaborative work that I've done, there is more work put in, in terms of time and care and thought, and there's more that comes out of it. In some sense, it is as if one plus one equals five or something. Some of the work we have to do, then, which is in line with what theorists in disability studies have been arguing for, is to make visible the work of care and building community.

Since the pandemic, it has become all the more important to think about intellectual work in terms of making connections that are often not legible either within the traditional rubrics of disciplinary knowledge or within the structures of academic recognition and rewards. So I want to honor the work that all of you have done in building a very dense network.

Within this network it's clear how important the contributions of practitioners and makers were to the project. And these contributions make clear, in turn, the importance of materiality to how we approach the history of disability and

22. E.g., Holmes 2019, and in progress.

embodied historical actors. I work a lot with texts and concepts. We can certainly talk a lot about how concepts of classicism or the ideal body structure how ancient people thought about the body while also continuing to shape many structural disadvantages today. But there's also something really powerful about not allowing our understanding of the ancient world to be reduced to those concepts produced by dominant authors and texts and instead recognizing the materiality of space, bodies, and objects and what the material record communicates.

What comes to mind in this context is Allyson Vieira's work in *On the Rock: The Acropolis Interviews*, where her interviews with contemporary marble workers on the Acropolis undermine the ideology of the Parthenon as pure idealism, or Debby Sneed's recent article "The Architecture of Access," which made me rethink the sanctuary of Asclepius as a physical space in antiquity (Figs. 18–20).²³ I could go on, but David, I wanted to listen to you talk a little bit more about how your work on embodiment and physicality in architecture affects your thinking about history and the ways you've pushed back against the frame of accessibility.

DG. Thanks for that question. I have so much to say to this topic. One of the aesthetics that became really important to us was a type of formlessness—a quality within the artifacts that we were reproducing that emerged through disabled forms of production and knowing.

So, for example, how can sign language, how can tactile graphics, how can vibrations from this tremulous model—how can they challenge the notion of reconstructing a static form, not just in classical aesthetics but in the preservationist and reconstructionist aesthetics that circulate around classicism from the nineteenth century, all the way up to contemporary work like the Brinkmanns?²⁴ These latter methods of reconstruction ask us to look at ruinous artifacts from the past and to understand what we think they looked like in their original and more pristine form.

In many ways, the project challenged that mode by using different forms, languages, senses. For example, it was a really brilliant idea of Jen's to have Christopher and Pia perform the paintings so they could never be reduced to a kind of formal reconstruction in the way that we understand that something like a painting might be reconstructed. The tactility of the seats and the vibrations in the ramp are inspired by that initial idea.

I think one can introduce disability, not just as a way of saying this is an alternative way of understanding the past, but to challenge the capacity to create single fixed images of past figures. As somebody who's gone through architectural education in this country in which sites like the Acropolis were used in a very disciplinary way to talk about what kinds of bodies belong in architecture, this is important. That idea is reinforced with the kinds of work preservationists in the 1950s and 1960s undertook, who actually intensified the experience of walking

23. Vieira 2019; Holmes and Vieira 2019; Sneed 2020.

24. Stiftung Archaeologie: <http://www.stiftung-archaeologie.de/reconstructions.html>.



Fig. 18: Allyson Vieira, Petros Georgopoulos carves the negative form of a massive architrave with a pneumatic chisel, from *On the Rock: The Acropolis Interviews* (2019), 150. Image courtesy of Allyson Vieira.

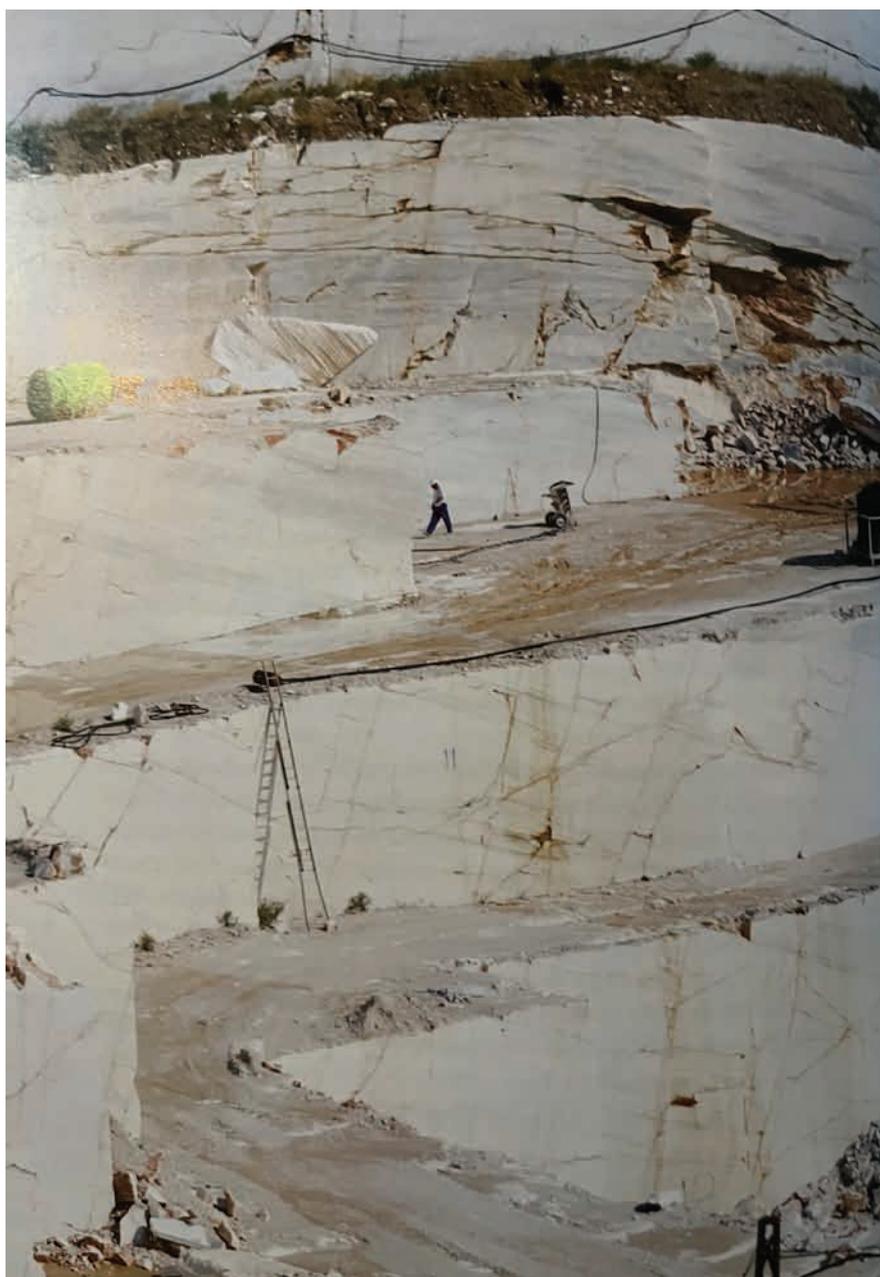


Fig. 19: Allyson Vieira, Dionyssos-Pentelicon quarry on Mt. Pentelli in northern Athens, from *On the Rock: The Acropolis Interviews* (2019), 134. Image courtesy of Allyson Vieira.



Fig. 20: Allyson Vieira, a marble craftsman carves a new marble piece by carefully copying the plaster negative form with a pointing machine, from *On the Rock: The Acropolis Interviews* (2019), 70. Image courtesy of Allyson Vieira.

up to the Acropolis by creating more physically arduous routes. The entire notion of experiencing the ancient past, particularly experiencing *this* past, centered, not just images of physical beauty, but also the physical capacities of the historians, researchers, architects who would come to these sites to understand them.

In that way, the project challenges notions of physicality on multiple different levels through a process of reconstruction. It challenges the way we have had to experience these sites in the past and the kinds of arduousness that come with what we think of as understanding archaeology and archaeological sites.

JS. David has really taught me about how the focus on accessibility often results in isolating disabled people from others who are accessing a site, for example, via different and separate pathways. Looking at that picture of the elevator you can see that only one person fits inside it and the elevator is accessed from a totally different side of the rock. And I just wanted to connect the perspective from that elevator's path to a photograph that Mantha took that's in the show in which the Parthenon itself, the iconic building, looks very different from expectations set by the central entrance and typical views.

MZ. The photograph emphasizes the rock itself, with the corner of the Parthenon monument just peeking over into the frame (see Fig. 3). Taken from the southwest edge of the Acropolis, it shows just the southwest corner of the Parthenon's pediment, de-emphasizing the canonical view of the monument and underscoring the materiality of the rock on which it stands. We tried to move away from the view of classicizing architecture for which the Parthenon is the prime paradigm, so often photographed, for example, from its east or west facade.

A colleague who was also exhibiting in the Biennale, Thomas Doxiades, has an office in the Plaka neighborhood, which lies beneath the northeastern slope of the Acropolis. When he entered the exhibition, he immediately recognized that this tiny corner was the Parthenon without seeing the installation full-blown. So you don't need to fully see the Parthenon to recognize the monumentality of that rock. This photograph draws our attention to the materiality of the Acropolis and the accompanying geological map highlights the multifaceted geological layers built up on it over time.²⁵ Focusing on the material qualities of the rock, it stresses the site's multilayered and textured history that is often flattened to focus on the fifth-century BCE Periclean building programme, thereby cleansing and idealizing it.

Brooke mentioned Allyson Vieira's engagement with contemporary stone masons working in the Acropolis Restoration Project, and Vieira's interviews with these craftspeople are another way of reminding us of the connection with ancient labor as well. In thinking, for example, about the precise ways in which both the ancient and modern Parthenons have been assembled by stone workers, we have to consider the work of moving its materials. In antiquity, those laboring on the

25. On the topography of the Acropolis, see Connelly 2014: 5–19. On the geology of the Acropolis, see Andronopoulos and Koukis 1976.

rock included enslaved people among the stone workers dragging these massive blocks through the landscape up to the Acropolis. So that central ancient ramp had multiple uses, including as a path for moving stones to build on top of the rock. As Sarah Williams Goldhagen has pointed out, when you look up at the materiality of the stones of the Acropolis, you are reminded of the layers of labor that have gone into placing the stones up there.²⁶ With the photographs and the map, we wanted to bring this plurality of perspectives into view.

PT. If I could jump in on that point and go back to what David said at the beginning about the formlessness produced through disabled forms of knowing and epistemology. I work a lot on epic and the long epic tradition from, say, Homer to Milton and Phillis Wheatley (Peters) at the end of the eighteenth century. Epic is a form that wants to sort of present itself as memorializing and monumentalizing. That's one of its key ways of affirming and underwriting its own authority. And as you all were talking, such interesting resonances came to mind between the steady progression of epic heroes towards their fixed teleological ends and the march or procession of tourists towards a monumental vision of the Acropolis and their realization of this goal. Epic typically stages these exclusionary moments of anxiety about disability, and there are poets of epic activity who respond to this by thinking about what happens if disability isn't eliminated from the epic. Milton is someone I come back to a lot on this point. At the end of *Paradise Lost* there are two people marching forward looking for their place of rest. There's a sort of comparison there between your re-imagination of what that path up to the Acropolis looks like, and what Adam and Eve are experiencing at this moment of very different epic culmination.

To bring it back more directly to what you said about an archaeology of disability in contrast to accessible heritage, as someone who lives with a spinal cord injury and who has not been to the Acropolis but has been to several ancient sites in Italy, I've had to think long and hard about how to navigate the vagaries of these spaces. And I've gotten stuck in accommodations loops and been subjected to riding up the elevator by myself when everyone else is going a different way.²⁷ Those sensible accommodations put so much pressure on the individual disabled person, and it's also so often a sort of ad hoc adjustment that's made. I mean, I realize that the elevator is not, that's a fixture, but so often it comes down to haphazard interventions, technological interventions, and it doesn't really hold society accountable for deep-seated ableist ideologies more broadly.

This project really helps us think better about what it looks like not just to change individual things about a site, but to reimagine that site as being more inclusive than many of us realize it could be in the present.

DG. One of my recent mentors as a disabled person is Georgina Kleege, who's a founder of disability studies and a theorist about art and visual experience, and

26. Goldhagen 2017: 225–33.

27. On the term "accommodations loop," see Price 2021.

who's blind.²⁸ One of her mantras, and that I've learned from my own collaborations with her, is that if you are a disabled scholar, architect, or performer, you have an obligation to transform the institutions with which you interact. It's not just about asking for access for yourself, but you have to change the institution so that there's something about your experiences and your lived knowledge that transforms something very essential that the institution imagines about itself. She asks that we extend far beyond the idea of access and accommodation and ask how we can change the school environments in which we work, the museums in which we operate. It's so important.

MZ. Thinking about that point, David, about intervening in spaces to make them anew, I'm remembering my experience in the Arsenale in Venice, when I went to see the first iteration of the research station. The haptic elements—the drill holes patterning the seats, the frieze of braille, the low vibrations of the ramp—each of these invite beholders to touch, but such touching is often forbidden in museum and gallery spaces, so the research station required a kind of unlearning on the part of participants.

JS. That's such a great point about unlearning art world norms around touch. In contrast with the Biennale, where visitors took themselves through the exhibition, at the Gipsoteca guides introduced visitors to the exhibition and invited them either verbally or in Italian Sign Language (LIS) to touch the ramp and to sit on the seats, so those elements of the research station were activated by the Gipsoteca staff in conversation with visitors, which became another collaborative loop.

BH. These points are all so powerful. Pasquale, I wanted to go back to what you were saying about epic and monumentality and the significance of aesthetics. There are so many challenges we need to make to monuments, precisely because of how monuments constitute publics. And so reimagining monuments creatively and critically can be really powerful. This question of monumentality and a kind of "iconic classicism" extends to classical sculpture. Jen and Mantha, how has this project shaped your thinking about your own work in relation to a kind of monumental Greek art history?

JS. What's coming to mind for me are images from the iteration in Pisa. Unlike at the Biennale where the project was one research station among many, here curator Anna Anguissola installed *An Archaeology of Disability* alone amid the historical nineteenth-century casts of ancient Greek and Roman sculpture that make up the museum's regular collection. These casts reproduce in plaster sculptures that once made up the Parthenon, stood on the Acropolis or in the Agora, among others. These invited juxtaposition with the contemporary forms of the research station.

For example, the collection includes a plaster cast of the marble statue of a naked young man known conventionally as the Kritios boy, a name based

28. Kleege 2017; Gissen and Kleege 2019.



Fig. 21: *An Archaeology of Disability*, installation view of Christopher Tester performing *Sēmata (Signs)* next to a nineteenth-century plaster cast of Kritios boy, La Gipsoteca di Arte Antica, Pisa March 2022. Photographed by Jennifer Stager.

on modern interpreters attributing its making to the ancient Greek artist Kritios (Fig. 21). The ancient statue was made sometime in the early fifth century when artists carved it from marble, inlaid its now-empty sockets with eyes assembled from different materials, and painted its outer layer with pigments that are no longer

visible beyond traces.²⁹ The statue was excavated in pieces from the Acropolis in the mid-nineteenth century, and the reassembled statue became a mainstay of plaster cast collections of that era, like the one housed at the Gipsoteca, circulating its form widely. When the renovated Acropolis Museum opened to the public in 2009, images of the iconic ancient marble statue, which is on display inside, were projected across the outer surface of the building. On the one hand, plaster casts of the Kritios boy circulated a reductive and idealized image of Greek antiquity—monochrome, white, young, nude, male—that the research station seeks to subvert. On the other hand, the cast of the statue in Pisa is mounted on a base where the statue has been fragmented just below the knees, invoking, instead, work by artists mounting critiques of classicism through the lens of disability mentioned by David earlier.³⁰ In the Gipsoteca's installation, curators placed the plaster cast of the Kritios boy mounted on its stand near the monitor displaying the film. So that statue is both in community with Christopher as he signs a story of the Acropolis where the ancient marble statue once stood, and in community with the contemporary audience seated on the stones watching Christopher perform or listening to Pia narrate the film-work, forming a kind of circle.

In another example, the Gipsoteca collection includes a plaster cast of the a bronze monument called the Tyrannicides of Harmodius and Aristogeiton, a pair of lovers turned icons of democracy (Figs. 22–24). A first monument to the pair in bronze made by the artist Antenor was said to have been taken by the Persian army as booty, and so collaborators Kritios (the same one to whom the statue of the young man mentioned above was attributed) and Nesiotes produced a second bronze monument to stand in the Agora, and this monument was copied widely in antiquity.³¹ In *Sēmata (Signs)*, Christopher and Pia perform the story of Harmodius and Aristogeiton, who sought revenge against the brother of the city's tyrant: "Although it was a personal feud, the bronze sculptures of these lovers became a symbol of the people rising up against abuse of power. The personal and the political have never been separate." At the same time as they perform this story, the historical plaster casts of the two lovers brandishing their weapons act on viewers from the other side of the Gipsoteca's gallery, translating this story across media—nineteenth-century plaster casts, Christopher's narration in American and Greek sign language, and Pia's spoken English audio description.

Thinking about the relationship between Christopher's performance and the physicality and materiality of the casts, and Pia's voice-work, they each had such different temporalities and different material instantiations. The juxtaposition of

29. For a discussion of the date, see Hurwit 1989. On its inlaid eyes, see Stager 2022: 182–237.

30. Note that the form of the plaster cast in Pisa, in which both of the statue's legs end just below the knee, differs from the current assembled form of the ancient marble statue in Athens, for which the statue's left leg has been reconstructed to the ankle.

31. Richter 1970; Stewart, Frischer, and Abdelaziz 2022.



Fig. 22: *An Archaeology of Disability*, installation view of Christopher Tester performing *Sēmata (Signs)* with two nineteenth-century plaster casts of the Tyrannicides in the foreground, La Gipsoteca di Arte Antica, Pisa 2022. Photograph courtesy of Dr. Anna Anguissola.

their performances with nineteenth-century plaster iterations of bronze statues from the fifth century BCE made possible in the second iteration of the research station at the Gipsoteca brings us back to where we started with the idea of feedback loops and unpredictable directions.

DG. I think a lot of recent literature about definitions of monuments argues that what makes a monument a monument is its distributed character. A monument is

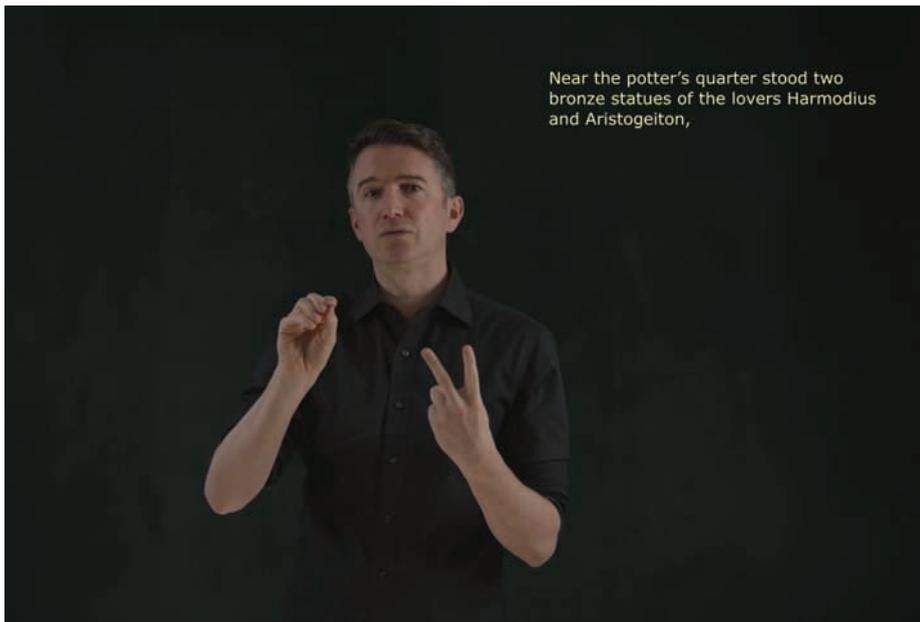


Fig. 23: Still of *Sēmata (Signs)*, with Christopher Tester performing the story of the Tyrannicides.

something that you encounter all over the world, as counterintuitive as that may sound. For example, pieces of the Acropolis are found all over the world as the Acropolis becomes reproduced through casts, as artifacts from it become taken and brought to places like London or elsewhere. This is an aspect of its monumental quality. It's not because it's a fixed thing that's preserved in one place, but it's precisely this kind of unstable, constantly reworked quality that gives it a monumental character. And then of course you can compare that to a more traditional notion of a monument, like a commemorative or figurative sculpture. That's a very different kind of concept of a monument. So that's something we really wrestled with in the project. We obviously tended towards the more distributed formless idea of a monument versus something that's stable, fixed, and held up on a pedestal, although we still resorted at moments to that more traditional aesthetics. In the film-work the paintings are acted out by a person, Christopher, and in the audio description that same script is voiced by a different person, Pia. And also with the ramp we nodded to a kind of aesthetics of the pedestal as a way to signify its potential connection to other kinds of classicisms.

TRANSITION TO CONVERSATION WITH THE PERFORMERS

BROOKE HOLMES. Thank you both very much for being part of this conversation. I'd like to start by asking you about the making of the project, how you approached your own contribution and how you thought about your involvement in the project as a whole.



Fig. 24: Installation view of Christopher Tester performing the story of the Tyrannicides, *Archaeology of Disability*, La Biennale di Venezia Architettura, Arsenale 2021. Photographed by Riccardo Banfi.

PIA J. HARGROVE. None of us were in the same space because of the pandemic. Whether we wanted to or not, we all had to make our individual contributions, but with the awareness of the power of the collective, both in envisioning the project and in how it would be displayed at the Biennale and in future iterations. A message doesn't spread if there's not another to carry it. I feel like the experience of voicing the script actually embodied this idea of being people called to the work because of the different things that we bring, through our own lenses, through our own experiences, and how we move through the world.

CHRISTOPHER TESTER. When I was first contacted for the project, I felt very removed. I was in Berlin, and I had to figure out how to work with a local team I'd never met before and how to converse with Jennifer. I had about a month or two before the filming when I'd been given the script. At the beginning, I wondered, *What is it that I can bring? What can I represent in American Sign Language (ASL) to Deaf people?*—that portion of it, but I didn't have a full awareness of the other parts yet. One big challenge for me was I had only a superficial knowledge of ancient history and the classics. It just wasn't in my background.

But when we brought the entire project together, it then became an interesting process. First, I was working alone as an individual trying to represent one view, from the American Sign Language community. After contributing the ASL part, I tried to figure out how it would fit in with all the other parts of this project. I'm still contemplating the best way to translate everyone else's work and incorporate it into mine. Maybe it's a little difficult.

BH. Listening to the two of you talk about the experience of participating in the project makes me think about how the conversations that Pasquale and I have had with you and with the curators become part of the project. They create another community around it, reflecting both the shifts of time and the experiences of individuals over the past two years, as well as the transformation of the project from one medium to another without anything being replaced. This transformation opens up the question of how much the accessibility of a project involves a change of medium that makes it diasporic.

PJH. I love what you're saying about making the project diasporic—and that it evolves as we move through time. Because I think where we leave so many people out of different experiences is when the idea of a particular piece of art is created. It becomes static and finite, and then whoever doesn't access it at that point in time, the way it was presented, never accesses it and doesn't relate, and we see this process repeatedly unfold over generations, over thousands of years. I feel like what you all, and Jen and David and Mantha, are really doing is taking these structures from ancient Greece—the stories, the photography, the work—and then bringing them to a different life now, in 2022, in the midst of the world shift that we are all experiencing.

Now, I'm reflecting on when I actually recorded the script in 2021 and where we were as a world with deep fear, panic, and isolation. Amid COVID-19, our racial

reckoning, environmental degradation around the world—including the wildfires burning in Greece—the energy was more somber and not as hopeful, so I don't even think that the conversation we're having today would have been possible then. It's amazing to think about the lens through which we experience the world and the importance of the *Zeitgeist*.

The question of the mediums through which information is presented is very powerful to me. I identify as a woman of African descent. I'm from Brooklyn, New York: fifth-generation Brooklyn on my mom's side; my dad's side is from the Carolinas, so African descent and Cherokee native from the Carolinas. When Jen first asked me whether I would be willing to voice the script, I said, "Sure, but I definitely have a big Brooklyn accent and regional intonation. And I don't know if that's the sound that you want if this project is going to Italy." Because if people hadn't been aware of racism and bias in our world or were hopeful it perhaps no longer existed, it is up front and center right now. And she said, "In addition to your powerful voice, that is part of why it's important for you to voice the script: because we often don't hear women at all and we don't think of them when it comes to studying antiquity, the arts, when we go to museums; it's often white British men who are visually seen and who are also audibly voicing the work." Therefore, we limit interest in history because of the accessibility, in a different way, of who relates to the work, who even feels connected, who's invited to experience it.

Voicing the script is one way of inviting different people into this project. It became so clear to me that just to hear my voice as a woman, as a Black woman with a Brooklyn accent—if someone can recognize that, depending on how they receive English—could mean a lot for accessibility in that way, of who feels connected to the work, who feels that the work speaks to them or that it's also for them without being exclusionary to someone else. I had the privilege of being able to read the Greek tragedies starting from public junior high school and then delved into them more in a boarding high school in Massachusetts. The mediums through which such work is presented illuminate what we read, the art we appreciate, and the ways in which that art tells the story of the world at a given moment.

I'm from Flatbush Prospect Lefferts Gardens, which is home to most of Brooklyn's cultural institutions—namely, the Brooklyn Museum, the central branch of the Brooklyn Public Library, the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, the Prospect Park Zoo, and Prospect Park; they all converge in this community. Although this is a very diverse community, that diversity is not often reflected in the visitors to these institutional spaces, a dynamic that my work continues to change. In teaching with the project, I brought Caroline Cerilli [then an undergraduate at Johns Hopkins who had worked on the film] into my classes at NYU. Caroline, who was double-majoring in museum studies and public health, spoke about how exhibition labels are often written at the twelfth-grade reading level, although most Americans read far below that. Additionally, the font size on the labels is often incredibly small, with a lot of text on a white background, which can be harder to process. So

Caroline brought awareness to elements in exhibition design that impede people's access to art in museums.

I've been inspired, actually, by encountering ancient Greek sculptures in museums, the *korai* in particular (Fig. 25). I have locs now, which I haven't had in years, but actually being in touch with the art and seeing the tactile nature of it and their long, tightly coiled hair, I can see myself reflected in it now differently than I would have before I voiced the work. Now I see it, and I'm like, this sculpture has cornrows, I don't care what you're telling me. But I don't think I would have that perspective without being embodied as the voice of the work.

CT. What Pia has said is very powerful and fascinating. I look at this from a different angle of experience, from the sign language aspect, and also from the Deaf experience. Historically, when we talk about American Sign Language, we've assumed that it's pretty standard. But finally, in the last five or six years, there's been more research and a broadening of our scope to include Black ASL from the segregation period. We've started to realize that the history of ASL and the presentation of the language have been written by a narrow band of white men. That was part of the challenge.

My initial struggle when asked to be involved in the project was due to my positioning and language use from an international perspective. I was living in Berlin at the time, finishing up my PhD. I'm an American, but over the previous four years, my language has changed. I was using American Sign Language while incorporating British Sign Language and International Sign. So for this project, I was a little bit stuck on which language should be presented and how it should be portrayed. Should it be an Italian Deaf person presenting an Italian sign language? Or should I use International Sign to be accessible to a wider population? But International Sign is rather elitist. It's accessible to a highly educated Deaf person who travels quite a bit and goes to international conferences. And I wouldn't think that applies to Deaf people who are just living in their communities.

So those are some of the questions that I had to ask myself. I thought: This is a huge project, and I'm going to be visible on screen presenting. I can't hide myself. We want the piece to be something that can be experienced as art, but it's art through me as Chris, the conduit, not only through the language itself. How will this aspect of my performance have an impact on people's experience of the video? If there were a different sign language performer of the work—a woman, a person of color, someone from another country—the audience's experience might be profoundly different. So I only bring one frame to the conversation.

We decided to use primarily American Sign Language because I'm an American and the team is mostly American. So we thought if that's the representation we have on the team, then it might be better to use ASL. But this is an international project, and I didn't want ASL to be the only language for the film. So I had a lot of research I needed to do, things I needed to see for myself in order to really relate to this project.



Fig. 25: Pia Hargrove viewing a polychrome reconstruction of the statue of Phrasikleia (back view) at the exhibition *Chroma: Ancient Sculpture in Color*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, September 22, 2022. Polymethyl methacrylate and pigments, Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung, Polychromy Research Project, Frankfurt am Main; on permanent loan from Ludwig-Maximilian Universität, Munich, Leibnizpreis 2007 O. Primavesi. September 2022. Photographed by Jennifer Stager.

I have a Greek friend based in Athens, Christos Giorgokostopoulos, who was wonderful. We were thinking about how to integrate Greek Sign Language into this project and the process of integrating the Greek signs, to me, felt like a way of building a relationship across borders, across different countries, and respecting Greek Sign Language and Greek culture without it being co-opted by American language and history. I asked him, “Did you have these name signs in your Greek history and your Deaf history?” The answer was usually yes. But he would check with his resources and his colleagues in Greece if he wasn’t sure about one of the signs and he’d say, “You know, the one I gave you before, don’t use that one; use this sign instead because it’s more accurate.” So Christos and I both invested in this project personally.

Through this translation process, well, first we built a bridge between different kinds of sign language and histories and cultures. And doing so helped us think about what other bridges we could build—between people of differing disabilities, Deaf and hearing alike. Could it be through language, through the physicality of the elements? Through visual elements? How could we build the bridges for people of differing disabilities? I will never truly be able to understand some of your disabilities, as you may not understand mine. Despite that, we can empathize. We can understand that you have an experience of how you see the world and mine is different and that’s really beneficial.

PASQUALE TOSCANO. What a galvanizing aim for the project, Christopher. Your discussion of how differently disabled people can appreciate the divergences in as well as continuities between their embodied/minded experiences also reminds me of your last answer, Pia, about the many ways in which inaccessibility signifies. It’s not only working in a disability context; it’s also applicable to the museum context, for instance, when explanations written under pieces of art are readily comprehensible only to certain people.

Often, as someone with multiple disabilities, I fixate on determining which things—spaces, events, meetings—are accessible for *me*, in the specific context of my needs. But discerning what is accessible is more complicated than I’ve just suggested because my spinal cord injury and hearing “loss” impact my day-to-day routine in different ways, as well as, and perhaps more importantly, because they arrived at different times in my life. It became clear that I was hard of hearing around age two, and I was fitted for my first pair of hearing aids shortly thereafter; sixteen years later, at age nineteen, I was struck from my bicycle by a pickup truck, an accident that now has me walking with a cane and brace. All of which means that my own ideas of accessibility have changed; they’ve become increasingly variegated and multilayered.

But so often, when we—and I include both my prior and current selves in that “we”—talk about accessibility, we speak in singularities. Even when the phrase “accessibility needs” comes into play, there’s still this sense that one kind

of supposedly nonnormative bodymind can, and should, be targeted. Yet what *An Archaeology of Disability* beautifully accentuates—and what your answers have highlighted today—is that embodied and minded alterity is plural and diverse, and that this multiplicity is reflected in the breadth of accessibilities we’ve discussed so far.

So I’m wondering if we can talk further about how both of your contributions to the project trouble our typical ways of discussing accessibility. Is there something about how your different performances are being synchronously tessellated here that offers a template for other filmmakers, and for any of us really, to adopt as we consider how to create more inclusive and welcoming spaces for a host of bodyminds?

CT. You’re correct: the challenge in terms of Deaf and hard-of-hearing people—for one specific example—is that there typically is an assumption that if you’re providing ASL interpretation, it will satisfy all Deaf and hard-of-hearing people’s needs and experiences. But that’s not true: some Deaf people know a sign language, but not all do. Some might prefer captions; others would rather have lipreading access. It changes based on the person. If you’re US-based, were you born and raised in the States, or did you move there from another country? So one answer doesn’t solve all accessibility needs, and I think it is an ongoing challenge.

And that’s just the small community of the Deaf and hard-of-hearing. Once you broaden that out to the further disability community, it gets wider still. Different languages, different access needs, different aspects. And it becomes messy. It is messy. And beautiful. But a beautiful mess. Because you can’t satisfy everyone. Some people will be. Others will be disappointed, others upset, and you can’t focus on one group or another. There will be accusations of wrong language or inadequate access fit, and I think that’s something that will always be an ongoing conversation within and outside of multiple communities. No matter which groups are involved—no matter their language or access needs—the discussion becomes an ongoing analysis, evaluation, and investigation. We have to try to navigate this path as we move along.

One really interesting part of this project is that it seems as though that’s the goal: to be more open, inclusive, and inviting—providing opportunities and options for many different ways it can impact audiences or be experienced. How to experience art, the language, the tactile aspect, whether it be auditory or visual—all those different senses are activated, and some folks are left out still. There are some that might not have the experience, even though we have these options available. We have all these different groups, and hopefully, their needs are met, but some might be overlooked; some might be forgotten. So there’s no answer really. It’s more a matter of heightened awareness, a recognition that even after we’ve done this, that, and the other, we haven’t solved all the problems, but we have tried to avoid offending, hurting, or excluding anyone. That’s the challenge with what it means to be accessible, how we can satisfy the needs of the broader community.

Or maybe we shouldn't try to be so broad; maybe we should bring it into a narrow focus for a specific group—for that moment, for that time—and hone in on what they need, their supports, and then the next day, move on to another group. Would that be better? Would that be a richer discussion than just effecting a broad standard application? I don't know.

PJH. Thank you, Christopher, for giving so much context around that and accessibility and the beautiful mess. Because our conversation today is an evolving one about how *An Archaeology of Disability* is impacting our lives—and how it's shifting and growing each day. People have actually been able to experience the exhibit in Venice and now in Pisa and hopefully in other places: the beauty of the vibratory ramp and the stone seat that David has envisioned and Mantha's photographs of the actual Acropolis, for those who have not been there in person, as well as the film *Sēmata*, which we're both a part of as the voice and the sign language actors. So there are many pieces causing our understanding of accessibility to evolve. But not just for “nonnormative bodyminds,” as Pasquale said—because what even does that mean? What does it mean to be “normative”? Who's using the word normative would inform the answer to that in some way.

So it is important for us to just think about all the various ways that accessibility evolves and to do what we're doing here—which is the beautiful mess—to have these conversations, but more than have the conversations, really put action forward and see how we can continue to expand the project and the ways in which it is communicated and discussed in classrooms, museums, in families and homes, and in Zoom rooms. All of this is part of what we hope for, that we will continue to ask more questions of folks such as “What do we need to do to accommodate your needs?” or “What would make you not just be included in the experience but truly feel and know that you belong?” And in this season, after these past few years in particular, I invite us all to ask these questions more often. And *An Archaeology of Disability* brings alive these questions of who we are including and then, once we're intentional about asking people what they need, whether we are making sure, in the process, that people belong.

PT. I love your—and the project's—commitment to intentionality, Pia, because so often, the burden to make places inclusive and welcoming to all kinds of bodies and minds falls upon people with disabilities. If *they* make enough noise, or exhaust themselves thoroughly enough, *maybe* some form of accessible heritage will take shape. But this model emphasizes ad hoc technological interventions that assume a limited application. The thinking goes that only certain people, or certain kinds of people, need these accommodations in the first place, so we only need to address specific concerns as they arise. As you both have highlighted in this conversation, however, there is no one way of making something accessible; no one form of the body or mind that needs additional considerations.

You could even make the argument that vagaries of time and circumstance and dreadful human intervention have disabled all of us from experiencing what

were once central features of the Acropolis: its tableaux of pictures, the lost ramp to the Parthenon. Speaking of which, one of the things that struck both Brooke and me about the film is that it's organized around the narration of what cannot be encountered directly. Your different forms of storytelling, and embodied storytelling especially, are shaping our engagement with historical evidence to make new communities in the present. But they're doing so in a very particular way, by taking images that are painted, at least in one part, and describing them anew. Of course, ekphrastic poetry is a time-honored cultural practice. But could you weigh in on how each of you thought about the art of translating a painting into words? How might that process represent its own kind of community building, possibly by building bridges—to use your language, Christopher—between different kinds of arts, in this case the visual, the textual, and the aural?

PJH. Yes, I gave a lot of thought to that in thinking about how to communicate the work. The beginning of the script talks about the *propylaea*, the area before the gates, which is where the picture gallery showing us the paintings of the stories that we are recounting would have been. So Christopher and I each performed these invitational words:

I will tell you some stories of who was once pictured in this gallery. . . . In ancient times, a rock offered visitors a seat from which to sit and contemplate these paintings, as I offer you a seat now. Let me paint for you with words.

I connected with that term, the *propylaea*, very deeply because it relates to my own experience of growing up in the Black Baptist church. Despite the differences between ancient Greece and contemporary New York, there seem to be similarities between the work being done “before the gates” and the cultural dynamics that take place in the Church, especially in terms of the importance of the ushers as the people who are ambassadors for the spirit moving into the edifice. The ushers and what they do set the tone regarding spoken language and other forms of communication; they set the stage, where we're talking about the Acropolis, and how these tragedies are acted out and embodied over time; and they are literally the gatekeepers, those who maybe can keep people out, but also those responsible for welcoming people in, for asking people what accommodations they need and then providing them, either ushering someone to their seat or connecting them with other people to allow them to be carried in and then supported throughout the entire service.

I really view myself as an usher to this work. I think about the picture gallery as the opening space to bring in the rest of the script, or to bring people physically into the exhibit, or as an intermediate phase to introduce the whole project. Christopher, you explained that you hadn't really studied any of the Greek tragedies prior to this text and hadn't really thought about Greek antiquity or the ancient language. But the picture gallery gives this space to introduce people to what is to come. I really wanted to communicate that with the way in which I

inflected my tone and shared my voice as welcoming. I tried my best to embody and embrace the role of being this guide to people experiencing the message of the text, whether they went to the actual exhibit or, like many of us, have seen photographs of the exhibit, both in Pisa and in Venice. I just felt like the words were powerful in that role, as the *propylaea* (“before the gates”), welcoming people into the experience and thinking about accommodating people in their experience of *An Archaeology of Disability*.

CT. When I was doing the research for this project, I was trying to set up things visually and to recognize that ASL, like all the sign languages, has a very strong history of storytelling that’s always been a part of what we call the oral tradition over the generations. We have performances, lived experiences that were performed in ASL and never written down. There are multiple ways to retell an event or a situation. So I incorporated that; I had that to my advantage.

In the film I had to strive to balance the art of storytelling with the translation of the English text, which obviously was not in ASL grammar (Fig. 26). What is it that was in the story, the exact names and details that needed to be maintained, but not at the expense of losing the art form? Do I become and live out the narration of what’s contained in the painting? And I had to think about how to honor the language of the art form of storyteller, which has persevered over many generations in many different sign languages, all over the world. So I had to think to myself: How can I bring the actual, physical part of Athens to life in a visual way—the ramp, the Parthenon, where all of the gods are seated, the sculptures? And fortunately, because ASL is a very visual language, I took advantage of the space and my hands

Excerpt of zoom transcript from filming *Sēmata (Signs)* March 21, 2021

Murder of Polyxena

JMSS [10:19:32] That describes the dress, then a binder on her ankle and on her knee. We can simplify that description. I borrowed it from a vase painting that depicts her sacrifice. In it she’s wearing a dress, and you can see the press of their hands into the dress in the painting. So, I was trying to capture this sense of them restraining her in a way that crumples the fabric.

CT [10:20:22] Okay, I just wanted to make sure I was right on “hold” or if they were tying her up. I wasn’t sure in the discussion which one.

JMSS [10:20:36] It’s holding. It’s their fingers, you know, restraining her in this violent way.

CT [10:20:41] Okay.

JMSS [10:20:49] Thank you. If adding the stars to the dress is too distracting, feel free to cut that. I wanted to kind of capture the sense of textile, but...

CT [10:21:11] I think it’s fine. I think we can leave it. That’s the easy part visually. They look entirely different in sign language so I wanted to make sure that I was clear with the action, but the action of holding can be represented.

Fig. 26: Excerpt from the Zoom transcript from filming *Sēmata (Signs)*, March 21, 2021.

to create the setting, and I hoped that that would match what it looked like in the real world.

But this was a challenge because it's very easy to establish the wrong placement of specific items within the story. For example, if I said, "You come in the entrance at the front," but if I put the sculpture of Hephaestus in the wrong place, somebody would say, "You put it in the wrong place," so I needed to do all this research ahead of time to know exactly where and how the gods appeared: Were they standing? Were they kneeling? Were they seated? Were they very tall, was there a lot of verticality in this statue? I had to make sure of all of that.

I also wanted to make sure that the story felt real. So I took a little license with the narrative and did some shifting for art's sake. I was walking a very thin line, though. I had to make sure that I accurately conveyed the facts, but it was a story as well, and I wanted people to be able to enjoy the genre of the story and be able to engage with it and not be overwhelmed by all the details. All of that was part of the performance: How can a story bring people in and also provide access to the experience of the Greeks and what their vision of access was? You know, there's a conversation about the ramp and how people clustered together to carry others up physically.³² The sign for carrying can be neutral, without demonstrating the way people carried one another in this story. But I changed it to be actually up on my shoulder. The simple change in movement with this one sign showed the audience that people had to physically support their community. They didn't just guide them by hand. Sometimes, it was some heavy lifting, literally.

BH. When you're talking about getting it right, Christopher, it really resonates with me as someone who trained in comparative literature but who's been in classics for a long time now. This logic of error governed so much of classics as a nineteenth- and twentieth-century discipline. Getting it right is sometimes very important. The problem is when a certain kind of getting it right is extended to all kinds of interpretive work. That is so crucial to why certain stories get told about the past. Because the white men who were writing the grammar books and writing the commentaries often assume that they can give you the dative and then tell you in the same breath that Electra or Polyxena or whoever is hysterical, as if that belongs to the same order of knowledge.

When I teach Greek, I say to my students, we're going to do the grammar for the same reason, Christopher, that you said you wanted to get it right: to honor the difference of the past, to try to do a kind of radical imagination as the work of reading and engaging ancient texts that's similar to what we do when we speak to one another in all of our difference—as a form of respect. But not because

32. Gissen 2015.

getting it right is a form of power. The storytelling is actually so much of what it means to work with what we can gather through research to create the stories that make these texts and an ancient past open to communities in the present that are inclusive and multiple. So I heard in what you were saying about accuracy something that I think governs a lot of people's interactions with scholars of antiquity: Am I going to get it "right"? This is a real problem, when a logic of error is weaponized.

You were speaking, Christopher, about the relationship between oral traditions of storytelling and the Deaf community, and Pia, you were talking about your experience in the Black Baptist church and imagining that as part of your work; I'm also thinking, Pia, about the work you've done with your organization Creating Legacies. How do you see the relationship between different aspects of your own identities as scholars, as community activists, and as performers? What kind of movement between those different roles did you experience in this project?

PJH. In so many ways, Christopher, what you were just sharing about the storytelling is so powerful. Just to be in the Zoom room with you and recognizing that we both had a very distinct and dynamic process alone in a lot of ways, in the process of acting it out, but still in community with other folks on how to sign certain words, how to pronounce certain words, even understanding what the stories are, what the artwork looked like, what are the tragedies being referred to, and then physically trying to feel them. So I love that you and Brooke are both bringing light to how these texts have been taught in an exclusionary way and how people were told that there was one right way to translate them and the rest were incorrect.

This project highlights that there being one right way is absolutely false. And that the text and the artwork will be revealed as we go along, as we are allowing ourselves to embody the work, to share the work, to be in community around translation, the story, the photographs, the paintings, the sculptures, and the different forms of art that are present all through storytelling. And we know that stories around the world have not been told except from the perspective of a few people, and often when alternative stories have been documented in the written word or in art forms, they've been destroyed. And even this is narrated in *Sēmata*, with the bronze sculptures of the lovers Harmodius and Aristogeiton, which were stolen and then stolen back again.³³ So even in that short text we get an example of artwork that told an alternative story.

33. The script for the film reads: "Although it was a personal feud, the bronze sculptures of these lovers became a symbol of the people rising up against abuse of power. The personal and the political have never been separate. When Persian troops invaded the city of Athens, the Persian ruler Xerxes

The African-American tradition of the griot, the storyteller being a keeper of the flame, one who will continue to tell the stories and encourage others to do the same, is something that's been important in my life. My purpose and my journey is to encourage that storytelling, understanding that the ability and the knowledge even to be able to physically read and write a text was taken from people of African descent on these mainland United States. While we no longer have slavery in its historical form to deny access to literacy, we continue to have inequitable educational systems throughout the country across racial lines and often determined by socioeconomic class, which we know is inextricably linked to the construct of race in America, inequities continue to impact literacy.

Christopher, you highlighted that you did not engage with ancient Greek texts in the past, and I think that speaks to the fact that we all have such different experiences. So the power of the griot is in what we're all bringing to change how this narrative has been presented over time. As you mentioned, Christopher, International Sign is for highly-educated people in the Deaf community. As a woman of African descent, a mother, a community cultivator, a professor of social work, and as the founder of my organization, Creating Legacies, I ask: How are we telling our stories; how are we honoring other people's stories and encouraging them in the process?

The whole theme of this project is: How do we ascend together and create broader and broader communities so that we're welcoming perspectives and embodying experiences? With *An Archaeology of Disability*, we can feel the vibratory ramp, touch the stone seats, see Christopher's performance, or hear mine. Our experiences are varied: there is not one form. The more that we collaborate, the more we ascend together. That is how we're creating legacies. That is how we're continuing to be griots in our world.

CT. Thank you. I think that that's a huge positive for us to have such multiple roles, Pia. You mentioned being a mother, African American, a scholar, and so on. We all have our own positions, and we have to shift between them, depending on what we're doing at that time. My primary identity has been as an interpreter. I actually got my PhD in interpreting, and now I'm a teacher and professor. In interpretation and translation, the main principle is accuracy. You have to identify what best fits the intent of the speaker.

Over time, I would say the primacy of accuracy has been challenged. Some people now say: Well, what does accuracy mean anyway? Can't we just throw that out and focus on, say, the feeling, the meaning, the idea? Interpretation is an entire process; it's not just about signed language. The problem is: Who can decide, "Yes,

stole these bronze sculptures, but hundreds of years later Antiochus stole them back. Over the centuries copies of this pair have circulated and recirculated as symbols of the demos, or people."

this is qualified”)? Who can evaluate? Some people say—in the field of sign language anyway—that Deaf people are the only people who can really say that this is a qualified translation or interpretation. But many Deaf people have experienced language deprivation, due to delayed exposure to language as children and not learning sign language at birth, from their family. This is a complicated concept that requires a separate discussion.³⁴ It is, however, a common issue. Many people have experienced oppression due to being Deaf and using sign language instead of speaking.

But now the argument is that we should have access in both ways. We should have Deaf people evaluating the interpretation. And we should find the best way to match the meaning. However, the people who can hear, who could help determine some of this, aren’t as experienced, or bilingual, in both languages, so can they judge this? Their experience in the world—how they’ve navigated the world—is not in a visual way as it is for Deaf people.

And so this is something that I’ve actually been thinking about and analyzing and struggling with myself. I do a lot of performance work, both in theater and in other kinds of artistic venues. And that tends to be more freeform. Just tell the story. But how is it that we can tell a story, that we can broaden people’s experiences and bring some enjoyment and pleasure and fun? It can be a learning experience. Sometimes for me as a performer, I feel a struggle about the accuracy. An audience member who is Deaf might say: I want to know what’s presented in the English, in the original text, but tell it to me in my language. So, for the interpreter, the interpretation of the text is the ongoing struggle. The Deaf community is really pretty small. There isn’t much access to English in the vernacular. We access the language either through captions or printed in texts, but not through hearing it from the original source. So we’ll navigate that experience differently.

But in the performance, we have to find a balance. We want to show the audience what it is in their language so they can enjoy watching it. But in the back of my mind, I know that they’ve experienced language barriers. I know that they’re frustrated that others might not provide access. Or maybe even the Deaf person does not have the linguistic capital to begin with, due to language deprivation as I mentioned earlier, where the Deaf individual experienced delays in acquiring their first language, whether it’s English or ASL. So then what do you do? And that’s the very sad part of what our community is struggling with right now. Linguistic capital for us is very limited for too many. And for me, as a person who has very different roles and different positions—I’m from Vermont, I’m a gay man—I take advantage of this breadth to incorporate, and perhaps project, all of those roles. And now I’m

34. For more on “language deprivation” among Deaf and hard-of-hearing children, see, e.g., Hall, Hall, and Caselli 2019.

away from the messy, now I'm into the beautiful part of the process. I may choose to focus on one dimension, or I may choose to incorporate them all, and I may produce some of them more strongly than others. That's just kind of how we have to go along with it. And we progress.

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