

Experiments in Access and the Commonplace Habits of Denial

Shapeshifting Inside the Asymmetrical Power of the Art World*

**Through Personal Reflections and Ongoing Inquiries*

By Tiffany Harker and Iris Williamson
2021-22 CFAR Curators in Residence

access (n.)

*early 14c., "an attack of fever," from Old French acces "onslaught, attack; onset (of an illness)" (14c.), from Latin accessus "a coming to, an approach; way of approach, entrance," noun use of past participle of accedere "to approach," from assimilated form of ad "to" (see ad-) + cedere "go, move, withdraw" (from PIE root *ked- "to go, yield"). English sense of "an entrance" (c. 1600) is directly from Latin. Meaning "habit or power of getting into the presence of (someone or something)" is from late 14c.*

-Lieberman, Anatoly, *Analytic Dictionary of English Etymology*, University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Those in power rely on systems of privileging the few at the expense of the many. Global economies and governments not only perpetuate inequality, but rely on maintaining power through systems of oppression that control the public through language, thinking, and behavior. To many, this process can appear indecipherable or even the "natural order of things" and these deeply ingrained ideologies result in habitual exclusion. *Habits Of Denial* seeks to examine some of the ways in which these systems dehumanize in practice and affect the behavior of our everyday life.

Habits of Denial is a series of public programs and exhibitions exploring the broad theme of ACCESS, exhibited online and in venues in Eugene and Portland, Oregon with additional research and participation from across the country and online. Collaborating artists investigate specific issues within larger systems of power and its embedded exclusionary impacts. Four anchoring programs examine ACCESS through lenses of language and communication, technology and economies, communities and archives, and Indigeneity and institutions.

We understood that the invitation to curate a series of projects, at least in part, was connected to our curatorial and programming partnership at HOLDING Contemporary. Our gallery is a visual arts exhibition space that functions both as a commercial gallery and an experimental art project. Our unique financial model involves a

community of Shareholders for the operations support as a way to consider in practical terms the themes of access, power, and capitalism. This essential component of the gallery allows us to continuously re-envision the present alongside the artists we work with. We advocate for greater visibility of non-white artists and project proposals that consider presentations and exhibitions that create new discourse to counter the harm that the “art world” has historically perpetuated. We support artists who are radically honest about their human experience—both implicitly and explicitly—and ground our praxis in alternatives to the white cube.

To curate a series of programs on the theme of ACCESS requires implication, both for ourselves as curators and arts administrators and for the sponsoring institutions. It’s a pluralistic state of existence as underfunded, underpaid arts workers and as individuals that simultaneously function as gatekeepers in the visual arts; responsible for offering and denying opportunities through our gallery project. A state of being that requires philosophical confrontations and perpetual shapeshifting.

HOLDING Contemporary was born from interest in alternative art possibilities and from a growing disconnect from an art world discourse that favors posturing over liberatory action. While still flawed, the gallery embraces regular critique, self-reflection, reassessment and modification. This invitation from the Center for Art Research to present a program about ACCESS requires deeper reflection on our own gatekeeping and contribution to systems that prevent access, as well as a critique of the institutions who are, in a way, expecting access to the artists we are working with. Ultimately, *Habits of Denial* attempts to shine light on this structural hypocrisy while considering open-ended questions along the way.

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

A Conversation on Power and Access: Jovencio de La Paz, Tannaz Farsi, Christine Miller, and Xia Zhang, Moderated by Carmen Brewton Denison

Social movements are valid [only] when they suddenly appear or are metabolized by white institutions that seek to neutralize them.

- Carmen Brewton Denison

In my view language was the most important vehicle through which that power fascinated and held the soul prisoner. [.] Language was the means of spiritual subjugation.

- Wa Thiong’o Ngugi

The first project in *Habits of Denial* required a “positioning” and a recognition of the massive and all-encompassing scale of the theme ACCESS. An exhibition-as-laboratory (*Describing Language*) that culminated into a public online discussion (“A Conversation on Power and Access”), addressed ways in which the denial of access is a systemized process that can be seen in every part of life, even embedded in the ways we think and how we communicate.

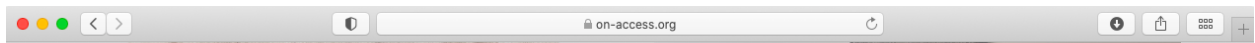




Installation, *Describing Language* Exhibition, New Harmony Gallery of Contemporary Art

Describing Language: Thinking Through Access and Communication served as both an exhibition and a laboratory for examining the ways in which language and other methods of communication allow or deny access. The project also positioned the spatial terms of the series: framing a post-COVID cross-country curatorial collaboration (Iris Williamson in Indiana, Tiffany Harker in Oregon) and reckoning with personal employment struggles and limited access to physical resources, specifically, working with rural places and communities. The exhibition *Describing Language* was installed at [New Harmony Gallery of Contemporary Art](#), a university gallery at the University of Southern Indiana. Exhibiting artists included Farhad Bahram, Jodie Cavalier, Jovencio de la Paz, Tannaz Farsi, Christine Miller, Warren Miller, Alyson Provox, Josie Love Roebuck, Xia Zhang, and Yuyang Zhang, who addressed issues including global language and patterns of colonization, Semiotics, education, propaganda, resistance, technology, ableism, emotion, labor, and identity.

Serving as points of entry for community discussion and investigation, *Describing Language* was a malleable and changing space that welcomed additional examples, experiences, and learning opportunities around the theme of communication and access. The exhibition included a workshop space and [online platform](#) where students, faculty, community members, and visitors could share stories, artwork, articles, and other examples of how language and communication can be disjointed.



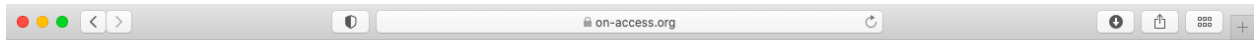
Jovencio de la Paz



Tannaz Farsi



Screenshot, *Describing Language* Website on-access.org



On Access

Describing Language

9/14/21

Place-Name Etymology

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9/14/21

Why Some Places Don't Have Names

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9/14/21

Mapped: Placenames Containing Slur for Indigenous Women

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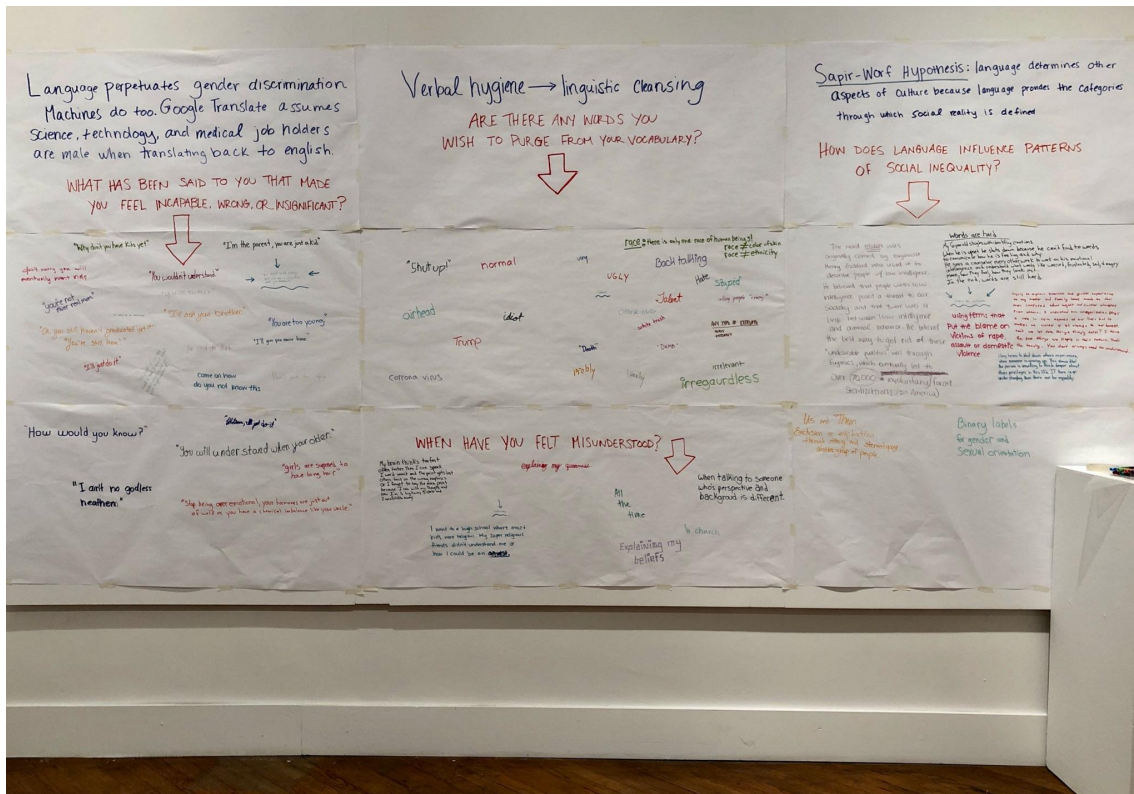
8/31/21

"Language and Woman's

8/26/21

How the Design Industry

Screenshot, *Describing Language* Website on-access.org



Visitor Participation, New Harmony Gallery of Contemporary Art

Describing Language at New Harmony Gallery of Contemporary Art led up to the panel discussion that officially launched *Habits of Denial*. “A Conversation on Power and Access” confronts exclusionary systems that are embedded in the ways we communicate with one another. Portland-based writer, educator, artist, and activist Carmen Brewton Denison met individually with artists Jovencio de la Paz, Tannaz Farsi, Christine Miller, and Xia Zhang and then moderated the discussion over Zoom with Farsi and Miller. Discussions examined how the systemic and embodied elements of colonialism and white supremacy are experienced in these visual artists’ studio practices and, more broadly, how it impacts the words we speak and how we think. In this conversation, the groundwork was laid about the systems we live in and how they influence every aspect of life.

How does tokenism aestheticize and monetize a very real struggle for access, for the benefit of those in power? Who belongs and who doesn't, as “American”? How does language reinforce white supremacy?



Screenshots from Think Tank Conversation: Carmen Brewer Denison, Tannaz Farsi, Christine Miller

TECHNOLOGY AND ECONOMIES

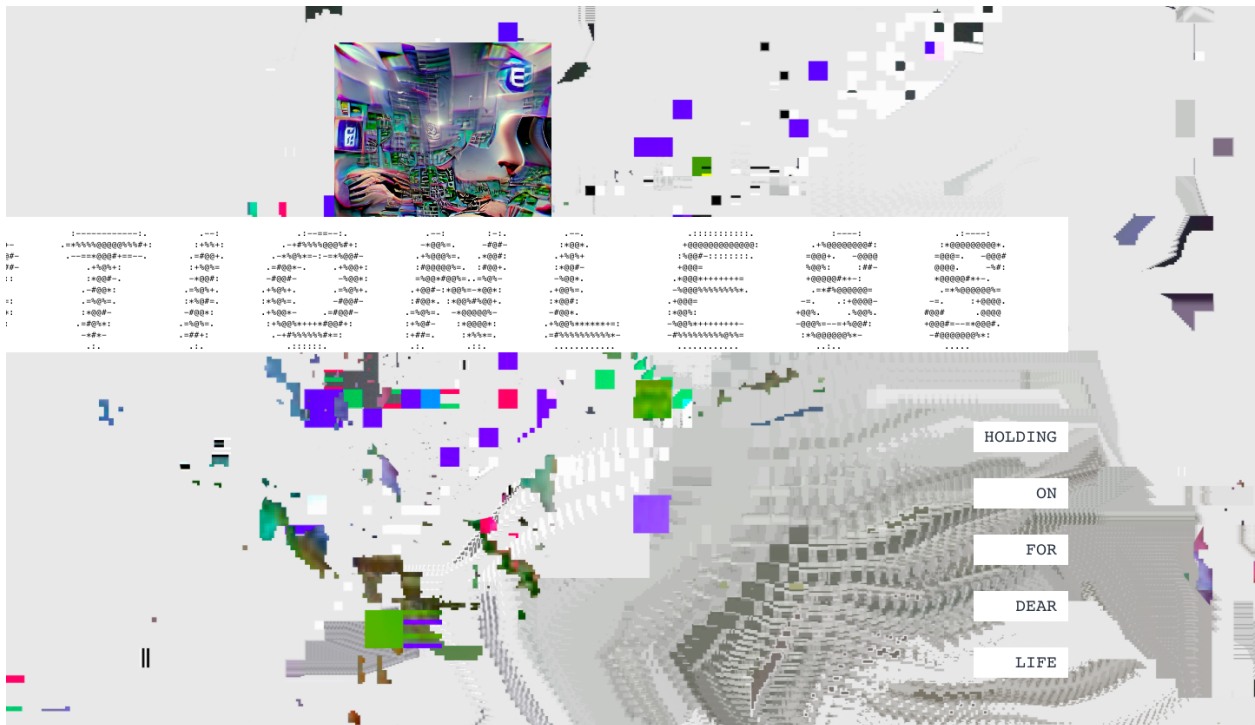
***Frictionless: Holding On For Dear Life* by DB Amorin, Tabitha Nikolai, and Ralph Pugay**

I think we're in this environment of increasing complexity and increasing proliferation of [emergent technologies] that people don't understand, and that the technology and the paradigms purposefully obfuscate their mechanisms of action.

—Tabitha Nikolai

I think that mistranslation is what brings people towards being really excited about cryptocurrency because they could be the ones that 1: Are contributing to a new world order that is a replacement of this old one that doesn't work for everyone and 2: Given the financial implications of crypto, they could also be potentially the ones that are on top.

—Ralph Pugay



Screenshot, *Frictionless* Website

Artists Ralph Pugay, Tabitha Nikolai, and DB Amorin describe the web-based research project *Frictionless: Holding on For Dear Life* as the following:

The digital systems that increasingly permeate our lives necessitate vast public trust. They advance ideals of transparency, while simultaneously becoming more arcane to an increasingly dependent and precarious

user-base. Artists, community organizers and their extended networks find themselves in a unique position: while able to benefit from the adoption of such technologies, and bring accountability to them, they are also populations highly susceptible to the unseen ramifications of tech at scale (blockchain, web 3.0, social media, deep-fakes, AI, gamification). In this way, Amarin, Nikolai, and Pugay see their role as resident non-experts as key to an investigation of emergent technology's social impacts. Toward that end, they have sourced questions and input from communities they see as particularly interested in, and vulnerable to, this rapidly-shifting technological landscape. Using this insight, their own curiosity and research as artists working with new technologies, they convened thematic discussions that have been recorded, transcribed, and released, along with their research, in a media-rich web document.



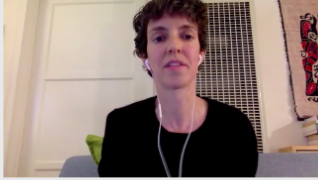
Screenshot, *Frictionless Website*

Frictionless: Holding on For Dear Life is a beautifully self-contained research process about digital technologies. In following their research through the series of conversations and accompanying readings, we feel much more equipped—as an arts worker and as a citizen of the world in 2022—to navigate some of these rapidly changing technologies and what appears to be the next stage of Capitalism. These resources should prove valuable to peers and fellow non-experts as well.

frictionless.fail


Conversation #3: Acceleration & Slowness

w/ DB Amorin, Tabitha Nikolai, Ralph Pugay & Emily Martinez



DB Amorin [00:09:05]
Cool. Well here we are. Welcome! This is our third conversation in our series. We're convening today with our first guest, Emily Martinez from Los Angeles, California. and we're going to be talking today primarily about AI and Machine Learning, amongst other of these other texts that weave in and out. The kind of container that we've built for the conversation is "Acceleration and Slowness" just thinking about the turnover from Web 2.0 to Web 3.0 and the kind of role that the algorithm itself has played in that and the roles in which those texts illuminate these darker areas of technology and areas where things are obfuscated or not as clear and how we can wrap our heads around where all this is going, using this technology. So I guess we should re-introduce ourselves for people who are tuning in for the first time. Maybe Ralph could start with a brief introduction?

Ralph Pugay [00:11:15]
Yeah! Hi Emily, my name is Ralph, I'm a Gemini, and I'm an artist and educator. I grew up in the Philippines, but have mainly been making work in the form of paintings, drawings, and socially-engaged projects. But usually has to do with concepts of, like, how do you translate trauma to an audience, but also how do you think about optimization within a practice of art in relation to the social. I dabble in so many different things. I'm kind of



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sqmb
Sept. 22 2021
<https://www.sqmb.com/2021/09/22/lawrence-lek-for-new-mystics/>

AI is an Ideology, Not a Technology
Jaron Lanier and E. Glen Weyl
Wired
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<https://iftt.in/gpwy2>
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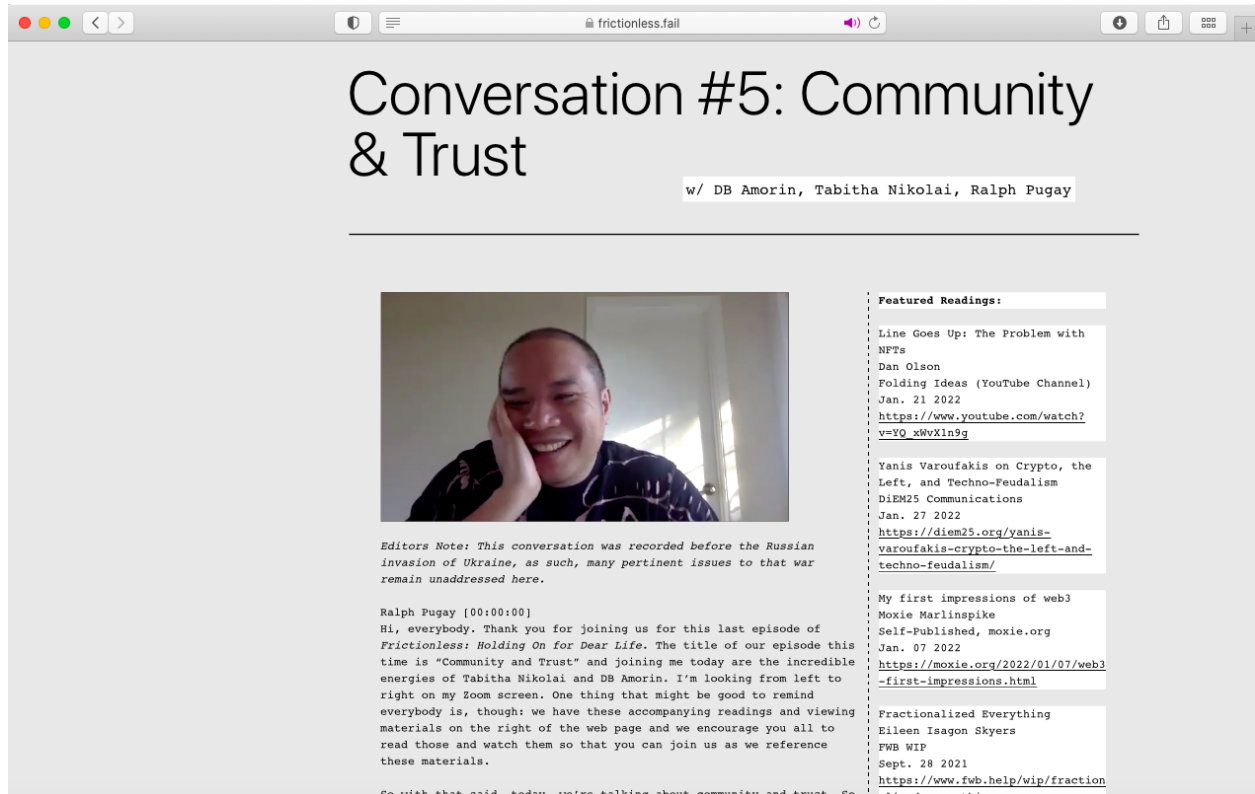
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<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/11/microwork-amazon-mechanical-turk-machine-learning>

Anatomy of an AI System: The Amazon Echo As An Anatomical Map of Human Labor, Data and Planetary Resources
Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler

Screenshot, *Frictionless Website*

The research ideas behind *Frictionless* relates to the research behind our primary collaborative project, HOLDING Contemporary, and provides a new level of understanding when thinking about how Capitalism drives the Art World. HOLDING Contemporary experiments with the systems of Capitalism, specifically through the gallery's "Shareholder Program" which allows for shared "ownership" of the gallery while supporting artists and being transparent and community-focused. This idea of ownership is also central to crypto and NFTs, but these and other technologies rely more and more on a lack of trust, opposite of the community values behind us as individuals, artists/arts workers, and the gallery project we collaborate on. Those who are strong supporters of these emergent technologies hype up new economical possibilities, sharing anecdotes about how it allows more access to people who need it. In reality though, you need money, equipment, programmers, and an understanding of the game to even be able to enter. Through NFTs, art is a rarified vehicle for moving money; an accelerated version of what Capitalism already does. So, in a way, this project provides information that can help us take HOLDING into its next phase.



Screenshot, *Frictionless* Website

By design, *Frictionless* was an opportunity for three artists to dig deeper into digital systems, what it means for them as artists, and larger ethical issues relating to who these systems benefit or disadvantage. The results proved complex and didn't solve any actual people-problems, mainly because they found that their inability to identify worthwhile use cases and clear solutions stands in contrast to web 3.0 technologies' basic premise: increased transparency, supposed scalability, and the purported equity it aims to bring to our networked lives. Regardless, the process itself gave the artists (and HOLDING) an education to either engage with or reject the machine—at least until it swallows us all.

Who benefits or is disadvantaged from digital economies and decentralized? Do we want everything in the world to be “own-able”? In a web 3.0 world, who can we trust?

COMMUNITIES AND ARCHIVES

Feeling Documents: A Liberated Archives Experience by Don't Shoot Portland

*I see no changes, all I see is racist faces. Misplaced hate makes disgrace to races.
- Tupac Shakur*

Don't Shoot Portland is an organization that uses art, education, and community engagement to create social change. Since 2014 they have provided access through free programming, advocacy work, and promoted civic participation for racial justice and human rights. Don't Shoot Portland's installations create a timeline of artistry and politics using social trends, music, art, and culture to amplify intersections between social justice and art, specifically highlighting revolutionary actions and inspiration for social change. Their organization operates outside the traditional art studio practice to offer visual presentations of protest and acknowledgement intertwined with advocacy, policy change, and the communication of unacknowledged histories of racism.

Don't Shoot Portland's installation for the *Habits of Denial* series titled *Feeling Documents: A Liberated Archives Experience*, featured historical documents, pop culture lyrics, and a large-scale collage of white supremacist imagery. The exhibit was intended to feel both overwhelming and intimate, organized so that visitors could make hour-long appointments and allow the time necessary to begin to digest and contemplate information in real time, in a safe setting. The gallery became a powerful physical container for reflection and multi-faceted discussions. Visitors expressed a range of emotions and states of being throughout the run of the exhibition. Some small groups stood in silence together, many individuals engaged us with questions and personal stories, several folks argued, others wept.

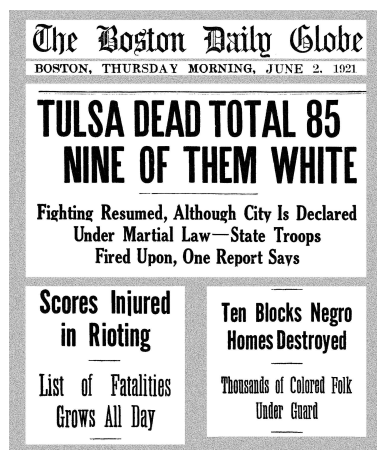
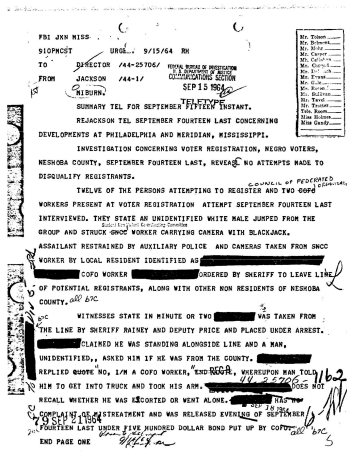
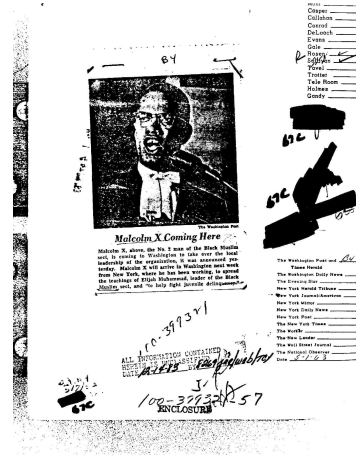
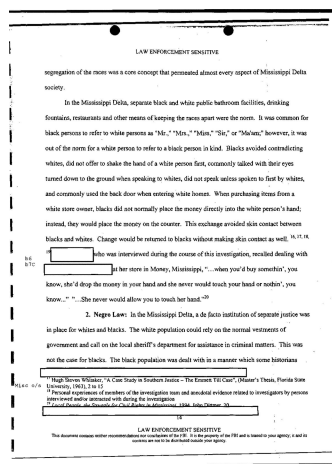
This exhibition implicated the viewer directly through the confrontation of the massive wall treatments. In one wall of racist historical and contemporary figures, blank profile outlines were incorporated into the tapestry of bodies, suggesting that the viewer could just as easily be included and implicated within the violently charged picture. Another wall featured wheat-pasted copies of old newspaper articles, Ku Klux Klan flyers, and declassified FBI documents revealing racist actions, policies, and stories from hundreds of years of American history. Much of the language is unsettlingly familiar, part of present day headlines, sound bites and discourse.

On the back wall, lyrics of Tupac Shakur's *Changes* were printed on vinyl wallpaper reiterating the cyclical nature of inaction related to systemic racism and state-sanctioned violence.

Don't Shoot Portland's art installations act as a disruption, an antidote to the devastating brutality associated with commonplace racism throughout history. They address issues of identity, politics, and history. Their work implicates us and everyone who experiences it fully. Inside the gallery space, there is no art marketplace connected to Don't Shoot Portland's projects —just the direct illumination of injustice, directly, visually, and powerfully to inspire social change.

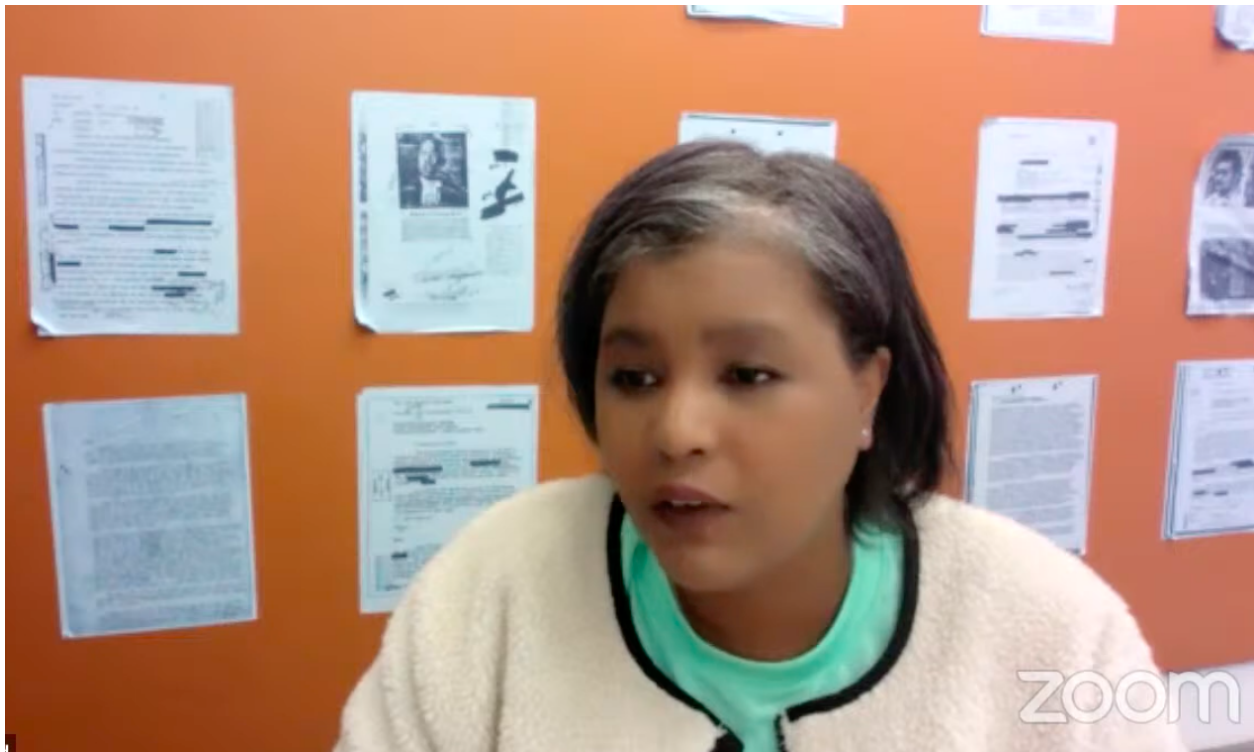
The art world gatekeeping that only supports visual artists through academia closes itself off from the range of possibilities that communication *through* art allows. Within the gallery space of HOLDING Contemporary, we have seen divergent practices and disciplines generate audiences and discourse which expand possibilities for the white cube.

Are explicit visuals about social issues less valuable in the contemporary art world? Can alternative modes of social justice art-making be expanded within fine art academia?





Screenshot, LaTonya Autry, Race in America: A *Liberated Archives* Discussion



Screenshot, Teresa Raiford, Race in America: A *Liberated Archives* Discussion

INDIGENEITY AND INSTITUTIONS

***pearly gates* by Sara Siestreem (Hanis Coos)**



Sara Siestreem (Hanis Coos)

I don't know if there is much I can do to help, but if you can think of anything, please let me know.

-Administration Representative, Unnamed Cultural Institution

Artist Sara Siestreem's project considers access in terms of land, ancestry, resources, and human relationships. Through an art museum installation, Siestreem alludes to institutional practices and systems that maintain ownership and possession over Indigenous ancestral objects. Her work bridges education and institutional reform and this project focuses on themes of remembrance, longing, and grief. The exhibit is both a celebration and a provocation related to Indigenous cultural and spiritual objects housed in museum collections. Siestreem embodies the role of protector, demonstrably enacting a kind of radical love and caretaking for her tribal community and for her ancestors. The following notes highlight some of the invisible parts of the project:

Over the course of several months we talked through possible presentations and connected with Danielle Knapp, McCosh Curator of The Artist Space at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art in Eugene. Knapp was interested in Siestreem's practice and offered the gallery inside the museum as a venue for the project. This presented an opportunity for the artist to more fully enact conceptual components of the project which meant securing the temporary freedom of historical Hanis Coos baskets, woven objects which were used in ceremony and considered living relatives. Even this temporary allowance for reprieve, from darkened archival drawers and storage inside institutions, made this a deeply meaningful endeavor.



Ted Loos, [New York Times, April 22, 2022](#)

Official loan requests were sent to multiple institutional collections in Oregon and California. At the time we didn't realize a truth that Siestreem already knew: that these museums and cultural institutions would individually "run out the clock" rather than straightforwardly reject our requests. Each person contacted about a loan referenced policy adherences along with effusive apologies. Seemingly endless emails and phone calls resulted in little progress along the way. They would assure us they would be passing the request along to other administrative departments and this happened over weeks until we ran out of time for a loan to be feasible. Polite denials were accompanied with acknowledgements of the need for policy change and promises of sharing updates that could help us circumvent the same barriers for future requests.

The material makeup of the exhibition was adapted over the course of the project and ultimately included Sara's own woven baskets and caps alongside historical

baskets and caps, a loan exception made possible by Siestreem's existing relationship with The University of Oregon Museum of Natural and Cultural History, an institution on campus grounds. Despite this act of generosity: What does it mean when colonizers become wardens of Indigenous cultural history? What constitutes Indigenous agency within the museum?



pearly gates Installation, Artist Project Space, Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, Eugene, Oregon



pearly gates Installation, Artist Project Space, Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, Eugene, Oregon

NAGPRA

NATIVE AMERICAN GRAVES PROTECTION and REPATRIATION ACT

In NAGPRA, physical custody means having immediate charge of Native American cultural items regardless of whether or not one has sufficient legal interest to lawfully treat the objects as part of one's collections.

In a statement to *The Art Newspaper*, a museum spokesperson claims that a “restrictive and inequitable interpretation of [NAGPRA](#) [...] privileges scientific and scholarly evidence over tribal interests, requiring an unreasonable degree of ‘scientific proof’ that often prevents repatriation”. In this case, “tribal knowledge or tradition was discounted or given less weight, and tribal representatives were not invited to participate in claim review discussions”...The Department of the Interior announced it had begun to review proposals for NAGPRA revisions this month, but it is unclear when the amendments will be finalized or enacted.

-[The Art Newspaper](#), February 21 2022, Gabriela Angeletti

Conclusion

Through *Habits of Denial* we were able to support four exceptional artist projects that pushed our understanding of power and inequity in new ways. “A Conversation on Access and Power” set the stage and reckoned with the oppressive that is baked into minds and bodies, *Frictionless* was a deep-dive into how emergent technologies perpetuate hyper-Capitalism rather than propose an alternative, *Feeling Documents* made visual the oppressive historical policies that perpetuate white supremacy, and *pearly gates* was an exercise in pure hope—and rejection. Themes continued to emerge around Institutional gatekeeping, the commodification of “diversity” efforts, principles around ownership, and how normal, almost mundane, the denial of access presents itself across disciplines. These *Habits of Denial* are camouflaged and run deep in the art world and through this project we were able to consider it a combination of renewed rage and clarity. Where to go from here is the question.

*It can be overwhelming to witness / experience / take in all the injustices of the moment: the good news is that *they're all connected.* So if your little corner of work involves pulling at one of the threads, you're helping to unravel the whole damn cloth.”*

-Ursula Wolfe-Rocca

In addition to all participating artists and speakers, we want to give a special thanks to the following individuals for the multifaceted support of the artists included in the series on ACCESS:

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Danielle Knapp, Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, Eugene

Danielle Mericle, Special Collections & University Archives
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Leslie Townsend, Director, Community Engagement and Historic New Harmony, University of Southern Indiana
Jennifer Newcomer, Music Licencing, The Numero Group

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