

Episode 4.22 Disability Art is the Last Avant-Garde with Sean Lee

June 12, 2020

Hannah McGregor: [00:00](#) [Theme Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is Secret Feminist Agenda. And before we get into this week's excellent conversation I wanna say a few words about Black Lives Matter and the current protests organized against police brutality and anti-Black racism, calling for the defunding and abolition of the police. Fundamental to my understanding of feminism is that it has to always be grounded in anti-racism. And I'm really disinterested in thinking about gender-based violence and gender-based discrimination that tries to claim that it needs to take precedent over or comes first before meaningful conversations about racism. We can't talk about feminism without talking about anti-racism. Just as, as I think we unpack in this conversation to come, we can't talk about feminism without talking about disability justice. These conversations are so fundamentally entangled with one another. I think what we're witnessing right now represents simultaneously a moment of sea change, a remarkable transformation in public opinion around things like the defunding of the police. This is an incredible opportunity for those of us who are not black to listen and read and learn and come up with really concrete and specific ways in which we can do better in standing against anti-black racism.

Hannah McGregor: [01:42](#) And I also think it's incredibly vital that we don't let this become a moment that is moved past and forgotten, a series of institutional statements and empty promises with ultimately a return to the status quo. I'm also aware when it comes to this podcast that because I am white and because I do not consistently centre the voices of Black feminists, that this podcast is potentially a safe place for people with some pretty deeply racist views. In addition to the many liberal racist views that most, if not all, white people hold. And I know that because I've had people who listened to this podcast who say that they like it and get positive stuff out of it, then tell me that they're really uncomfortable with the way I talk about white supremacy, for example. Uncomfortable in the sense of not believing me when I say that all white people are deeply embedded in and complicit with white supremacy. And I'm going to keep working to make this a project that you can't listen to comfortably while believing that, a project that pushes us all to encounter and grapple with and work against the

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ingrained structural racism of living in a white supremacist society. And I'm going to keep seeking to use the conversational mode of this podcast as an opportunity to have necessary and challenging and exciting conversations with feminists who push us all to think in more radical and liberatory ways.

Hannah McGregor: [03:34](#) In the meantime, I want to particularly point you towards another podcast that I think has been doing some really, really vital thinking on the topics of anti-Black racism and defunding the police. And that is a personal favourite that I have definitely already referenced in the show. It's the *Sandy & Nora* podcast hosted by Sandy Hudson and Nora Loreto and if you'd like to learn more about what defunding the police might look like practically, they've got a couple of really great episodes on the topic. Oh, and before we meet our guest, I also just want to state for the record. Fuck J.K. Rowling's transphobia. Alright, moving on. [Theme Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

Hannah McGregor: [04:18](#) Sean Lee is an artist and curator exploring the notion of disability, art, and accessibility as the last avant-garde. His methodology reframes embodied difference as a means to resist traditional, aesthetic idealities. Orienting towards a “crip horizon,” Sean gestures towards the transformative possibilities of a world that desires the way disability can disrupt. Sean is currently the director of programming at Tangled Art + Disability. Previous to this role, he was Tangled's inaugural curator in residence as well as Tangled's gallery manager. Sean was involved with the launch of Tangled Art Gallery and has been integral to countless exhibitions and public engagements throughout his tenure at Tangled Art + Disability. In addition to his position at Tangled, Sean is an independent curator, lecturer, and advisor, adding his insights and perspectives to conversations surrounding disability arts across Canada and the United States. Sean currently sits on the board of CARFAC Ontario, Creative Users Projects, and is a member of the Ontario Art Council's Deaf and Disability Advisory Committee and Toronto Art Council's Visual and Media Arts Committee. [Sean's Theme Music: "It's Gonna Be Okay, Baby" by MUNA]

Hannah McGregor: [05:44](#) Thank you so much for remotely joining me this morning. I am really excited to talk about the work that you have been doing with Tangled Art + Disability. And particularly, there's a point in your bio—that I then did a little bit of like, follow up googling, 'cause I'm a scholar, so I follow up google things sometimes—

Sean Lee: [06:07](#) [Laughs]

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- Hannah McGregor: [06:07](#) —about this idea of disability art as the last avant-garde. And I'm super stoked to like unpack this a little bit more because I'm really interested in the idea of like what multiple, layered avant-gardes look like in the world of art. But before we dive into like just a really [Laughs] just a really theoretical deep end of the pool here, you want to maybe tell us a little bit about the work that you do at the gallery where you work?
- Sean Lee: [06:36](#) Sure, yeah. I mean, well, I'm, I'm the director of programming at Tangled... As a image description of myself for anyone who's listening to the podcast, I'm an East Asian, masculine presenting, visibly disabled artist and curator. I am just kind of... I've been very casual, so even though I'm wearing my nice glasses, I've just been in like big baggy t-shirts. This one's a black one because, you know, it makes me look more serious this way.
- Hannah and Sean: [07:03](#) [Laughs]
- Hannah McGregor: [07:06](#) You look like an artist, for sure.
- Sean Lee: [07:09](#) [Laughs] Yeah. I work at Tangled Art + Disability. Tangled as an organization is really special to, to me, not just because I work there, but because we are a disability-led arts organization. I think we're, as far as I know, the only fully disability-led. That is, all of our staff identify as being from within the crip community. And I use the word "crip" to sort of reclaim that term and use it as an umbrella for folks from mad, deaf, disability, neurodiversity, chronically ill, and sick and spoon-y folks as, as sort of an umbrella for that. I think Tangled is, is really unique because we are like disability-led in that way, that our programming can be kind of more experimental and we were the first disability art gallery in, in Canada. So we were dedicated to presenting crip artists, mad, deaf, disabled artists, and... As well as creating and being led by curatorial practices of accessibility.
- Hannah McGregor: [08:19](#) Mhm. I love that! So, so let's unpack those two threads, which are both really, really exciting and interesting and I imagine entwined as well. So, disabled art and accessible curating—
- Sean Lee: [08:33](#) Mm.
- Hannah McGregor: [08:33](#) —which I'm sort of mentally picturing as like a Venn diagram that like—
- Sean Lee: [08:36](#) [Laughs] Yes.

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- Hannah McGregor: [08:36](#) —ideally all curatorial practices should be, regardless of the, the nature of the art should be accessible. And also, I can really, [Laughs] I can really see why like, disabled-led art community would prioritize accessible curatorial practices as well.
- Sean Lee: [08:54](#) Yeah.
- Hannah McGregor: [08:55](#) So maybe let's start with, with the accessible curatorial practices piece. Can you talk a little bit about what accessible curation looks like?
- Sean Lee: [09:02](#) Yeah. I think when I talk about accessible curation, we have to think about this idea of what disability culture is in the first place. I think a lot of times people assume that accessibility means that disabled audience members can physically get into a building.
- Hannah McGregor: [09:24](#) Mhm.
- Sean Lee: [09:24](#) That's as far as it sort of manifests. But accessible curatorial practices is really about considering the whole breadth of history and language and customs that make it so that communities can gather as cultures. And that is really where I approach this idea of accessible curatorial practices, is how do we not let accessibility just be another means to an ends, but rather access is a cultural aesthetic. And I think that's really vital to pinpoint because until we recognize access as a vital aesthetic to disability culture, then we're going to fall into the old tropes of the medical model of disability that is only thinking of disability as something located solely in the body—
- Hannah McGregor: [10:13](#) Mm!
- Sean Lee: [10:13](#) —instead of as a cultural phenomenon. And I think that's like... That's something that really got me excited about Tangled because when I was at school learning about art, you know, I think there is a massive history and canon of counterculture in, in the arts.
- Hannah McGregor: [10:31](#) Mhm.
- Sean Lee: [10:31](#) And, you know, that's... I was learning about queer theory and the civil rights movement, you know, feminist art... There, there were, there were all these kind of burgeoning movements that had really taken hold and established their own aesthetics. But disability was never mentioned in that context. Disability was always something that was very much hidden and it was about

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the individual experience. And so I had to piece together these ideas of what disability identity was just from like the, the different movements that I had learned about it. It wasn't until I came to Tangled and I thought about this idea that Eliza Chandler, who was a past artistic director of Tangled, talks about in enacting crip community, that I began to sort of flip the switch—

Hannah McGregor: [11:24](#)

Mhm.

Sean Lee: [11:24](#)

—on how I think about disability. And I thought about how art created by disabled folks can really be a point in which we can go back and push against these ideas that disability is lived in isolation.

Hannah McGregor: [11:39](#)

Mm.

Sean Lee: [11:39](#)

And so accessible curatorial practices really opens up these different ways that disability can disrupt our arts practices as a whole—

Hannah McGregor: [11:49](#)

Mhm.

Sean Lee: [11:49](#)

—while simultaneously opening up access to folks who typically don't feel that they're included in our arts sector.

Hannah McGregor: [11:58](#)

Mhm. Yeah! So that's a really more complex and nuanced and transformative understanding of accessibility than, you know, spaces need to be physically accessible. Though, certainly within the literary community, that is also a bar that almost no literary events—

Hannah and Sean: [12:15](#)

[Laughs]

Hannah McGregor: [12:15](#)

—meet in the first place.

Sean Lee: [12:18](#)

Yeah. I mean, I'm not saying spaces don't need to be physically accessible. They 100% do.

Hannah McGregor: [12:23](#)

Yep.

Sean Lee: [12:23](#)

But I think oftentimes the, the thing is that accessibility isn't... I don't think it's this checklist,—

Hannah McGregor: [12:29](#)

Mm!

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- Sean Lee: [12:29](#) —I don't think it's this place that you can say, "I have met this set of criteria and you know, I can just wash my hands and I never have to look at it again." Because I think, really, this idea of what access is and what disability culture is, is something that's moving all the time. It's always like a horizon there's, there's, you know... Queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz, he talks about this idea of the queer horizon, that queerness is never in the culture that we're in now because heteronormativity is sort of the way, the default.
- Hannah McGregor: [13:09](#) Mhm.
- Sean Lee: [13:09](#) And I think that applies doubly so for disability culture, that, that ableism is just completely pervasive in our society. And so this idea of access is actually like a really great way to resist ableism, but it is something that's continuing to, to move forward. You know? It's almost... It's not like an end goal, but rather it's an ethos that we can always... That crip horizon is something that we're striving for. And it's a way that we can show that we are opening with desire, that we're crippling that culture that we live in.
- Hannah McGregor: [13:46](#) Mhm. I love that, I love that image of the horizon is so powerful as a way of countering a kind of, like, neoliberal model of what diversity looks like, which is very much the checkbox model, right? Like we... Look, we followed all the rules, we checked off all the boxes, we got one of every identity included in the conversation. And so we did it.
- Sean Lee: [14:08](#) [Laughs]
- Hannah McGregor: [14:08](#) We're diverse. You know, there's, there's various, various problems with that, including the idea of sort of radical equity as being an achievable goal, rather than a conversation that's going to keep shifting. And I see so much from people all over the place, this complaint of like, "Well, I'm okay with this, but why do things keep changing?" Like, "I was good with X topic until somebody asks—
- Sean Lee: [14:36](#) Right.
- Hannah McGregor: [14:36](#) —somebody else asked for rights, or somebody asked for more rights, or somebody asked for something that just to me, personally, seems outside the bounds of, of courtesy—
- Sean Lee: [14:45](#) Right.

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- Hannah McGregor: [14:45](#) —or etiquette to ask for. Like, and now you have pushed things too far." And that is—
- Sean Lee: [14:51](#) Yeah.
- Hannah McGregor: [14:51](#) —a real outcome of the checkbox approach, right? Rather than a transformative approach from the beginning, which doesn't have that sense of "at some point we'll have accomplished this and then everybody has to stop asking for things."
- Sean Lee: [15:02](#) [Laughs] Right. And that's another thing that you've brought up that's, that's really important, is that these are things that really are human rights. And I think in particular, in Canada, the way that I approach the arts is that... The arts is, is something publicly funded.
- Hannah McGregor: [15:19](#) Mhm.
- Sean Lee: [15:19](#) It's something that arts councils are funding and the money that's fueling these presentations is often public money. And that's because in Canada, arts and culture is something that's funded, it's something important and vital to being kind of vibrant members of our community. And so when, when the art is inaccessible then I don't think it's a stretch to say that that's really a human right that folks don't have access to. That access, you know, to art is kind of access to life—
- Hannah McGregor: [15:55](#) Mhm.
- Sean Lee: [15:55](#) —in a lot of ways.
- Hannah McGregor: [15:56](#) Yeah. And the... I don't know, I feel like there's a whole really interesting direction we could go in terms of like, arts funding—
- Sean Lee: [16:04](#) [Laughs] Yes!
- Hannah McGregor: [16:04](#) —and the sort of top-down approach to accessibility, which is a conversation we're having in publishing right now.
- Sean Lee: [16:12](#) Mhm.
- Hannah McGregor: [16:12](#) But I don't want to get super waylaid [Laughs] into conversation about cultural funding.
- Sean Lee: [16:16](#) [Laughs]

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- Hannah McGregor: [16:16](#) I want to keep talking about accessible curatorial practices. I am so fascinated by this idea of like not starting with the medical model, but starting instead with a sort of cultural model. And I'm wondering if you can sort of help us—by us I mean, me and the listeners—like, wrap our heads around what this looks like in terms of some practical examples, like curatorial choices that are being made that do sort of model that more complex understanding of accessibility.
- Sean Lee: [16:46](#) Yeah! There's a disability curator named Amanda Cachia who taught talks about this idea of creative access as an approach to curating that I really learned a lot from. At Tangled, here, there are some practices that we've taken and researched, practices that folks like the Smithsonian Museum have put out in terms of some starting guidelines. So for example, hanging the works at a lower level, so that folks who are wheelchair users or folks who are of shorter stature can, can access the work; having audio guides created so that people coming in can either rent a headset or go online to access an audio guide of the works and they can experience it in a different way; and, you know, having potentially touchable points of access to your exhibition. Those are all really important things. And then there are practices that have come, for example, out of the UK, like relaxed performance, which is about creating an audience environment that folks feel more comfortable engaging in.
- Hannah McGregor: [17:57](#) Mhm.
- Sean Lee: [17:57](#) Relaxed performance originated for folks who are autistic or... For example, there's a really great artist, Jess Thom. Jess is an artist who has Tourette's. She identifies as "Touretteshero", that's her kind of moniker. And she does a lot of work around creating relaxed spaces to engage audience members. And relaxing a space can be anything from, you know, creating better sensory experiences, lighting, sound, but it can also mean just creating a more relaxed environment.
- Hannah McGregor: [18:35](#) Mhm.
- Sean Lee: [18:35](#) Folks can come in and out, folks can make noise when they need to, folks can, if they need to, get up and go, go around, and go into a chill out space, perhaps. And these are all things that we can enact through disability culture. But Amanda Cachia talks about creative access as a way of challenging these ideas of having standards. Of, you know, working with an artist from the get-go to think about how it is that we can make accessibility part of the aesthetic of the works. So, you know, at Tangled, I work with artists who really think about this and take

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it to heart. For example, we had a recent exhibition by an artist named Valentin Brown called *Body Farm*.

Hannah McGregor: [19:21](#)

Mhm.

Sean Lee: [19:21](#)

And in it, Valentin sort of immersed the audience with over a hundred really detailed paintings and drawings. And they were really intricate, they've got all sorts of messaging in them, and they sort of reference the human body in these like really, almost grotesque ways. And, and they intersect with trauma and narratives of transness and disability. But the thing is that if we were to create a audio guide of each individual piece, you know, over a hundred works and—

Hannah McGregor: [19:53](#)

Yeah...

Sean Lee: [19:53](#)

—you know, tons of sculptural pieces, it would be this like huge, like audiobook, that folks coming into a gallery, they're not here for.

Hannah McGregor: [20:02](#)

Yeah.

Sean Lee: [20:02](#)

They're not here to listen to a three-hour, four-hour, like, talk.

Hannah McGregor: [20:07](#)

Mhm.

Sean Lee: [20:07](#)

And so we thought together about how it is that we could create a similar experience. And Valentin sort of, you know, really approached access as an integral way to do *Body Farm* the exhibition.

Hannah McGregor: [20:20](#)

Yeah.

Sean Lee: [20:20](#)

So in addition to having some sculptural pieces that were touchable, there were these like unfired terracotta pieces that, you know... They were really abstract. So you, you could touch them and it might feel like almost an ear or a nose, but also it was this abstract figure with maybe some holes. And there were a thousand little terracotta sculptures. And then there was a piece called *Big Softie* that was this big sort of like, soft, squishy, touchable textile piece—

Hannah McGregor: [20:52](#)

Mhm.

Sean Lee: [20:52](#)

—sewn from different fabrics and different textures. And embedded inside were, you know, parts that would squeak—

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- Hannah McGregor: [20:58](#) [Surprised Gasp]
- Sean Lee: [20:58](#) —or parts that would honk. And they were really like fun. And if you found it... And all of a sudden it, the piece, almost like reacts back to you. It was really exciting.
- Hannah McGregor: [21:06](#) Mhm.
- Sean Lee: [21:08](#) The, the pieces that Valentin made were kind of a diary piece called his *Captain's Logs*. And, and Valentin took these *Captain's Logs* and created the audio description, not as a direct translation of the works themselves, but through a narrative of the *Captain's Logs* that he had already written on the backs of a lot of these works.
- Hannah McGregor: [21:31](#) Mhm.
- Sean Lee: [21:31](#) And so you get this kind of beautiful story that, in relation with the tactile pieces, helped to immerse yourself into the *Body Farm* better than if you were to listen to sort of these stagnant voices, just, you know, monotonously creating descriptions, you know?
- Hannah McGregor: [21:51](#) Yeah.
- Sean Lee: [21:51](#) "In this piece, it's a 18 by 12 piece and..." Not that there's anything about, about that, that isn't great, but it just wasn't the spirit of that work.
- Hannah McGregor: [22:00](#) Yeah.
- Sean Lee: [22:00](#) And I think that's what we mean by accessible curation is like, we, we don't just approach this checklist without criticality.
- Hannah McGregor: [22:08](#) Mhm.
- Sean Lee: [22:08](#) That we really are trying to create a cultural experience in our space.
- Hannah McGregor: [22:15](#) Yeah. That's such, that's such a great example of how fundamentally more transformative it is to think about accessibility right at the very beginning—
- Sean Lee: [22:22](#) Yeah.
- Hannah McGregor: [22:22](#) —then to be like, "I'm going to do everything and then at the end, I'm going to go through and be like, 'okay, check, check,

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check. Oh, I can't do that. But maybe nobody will notice it, nobody will get mad at me." Which, I think, is, is often what ends up happening. And is it difficult? I have in my mind... Like I have a lot of friends who work in various capacities and sort of event organizing. And it is, to come back to that like funding question, it is really difficult to imagine new models of doing events on the sort of shoestring budget that so many artists [Laughs] are working with or so many arts organizations are working with from the beginning.

- Sean Lee: [23:03](#) Yeah.
- Hannah McGregor: [23:03](#) I'm, I'm cognizant of the duress under which so many people in arts communities are working all the time.
- Sean Lee: [23:09](#) Yeah. And, and, you know, that is something that, that is also a constraint for us, is just that—
- Hannah McGregor: [23:13](#) Yeah.
- Sean Lee: [23:13](#) —access *is* something we'll notice in our budget, right?
- Hannah McGregor: [23:18](#) Yep.
- Sean Lee: [23:18](#) But I think because we make a very strategic decision to centre access, you know, maybe that means we have one less artist during our exhibition kind of cycle.
- Hannah McGregor: [23:30](#) Yep.
- Sean Lee: [23:30](#) But that we do these other exhibitions really well,—
- Hannah McGregor: [23:36](#) Yeah.
- Sean Lee: [23:36](#) —that we centre access, and we can, you know, we can work with the artists to think about the creative approaches for access that they want to do, and we can actually make them happen this way.
- Hannah McGregor: [23:47](#) Yep.
- Sean Lee: [23:47](#) 'Cause yeah, like, I certainly understand how, if you haven't been doing this already, it can feel like such a disruption, right? But there's this disability academic named Kelly Fritsch who uses the word "crip" as a verb. And I, I really loved it because a lot of folks from, from the disability art sector use it in this way,

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as a verb, as, as meaning to, to open with desire for the way that disability disrupts.

Hannah McGregor: [24:16](#)

Mm...

Sean Lee: [24:17](#)

And I think, I think that disruption is something that we shouldn't move away from. We should move towards it and we should allow this disruption to happen because if we're working in an ableist art sector, then do we really wanna participate in that?

Hannah McGregor: [24:32](#)

Mhm.

Sean Lee: [24:32](#)

Or do we want to, you know, try to shake things up and try to really think about what it is that we're doing when we're holding so many events that we ourselves are stretched to capacity.

Hannah McGregor: [24:45](#)

Mm!

Sean Lee: [24:45](#)

And I think that's another... Like, part of the ingrained ableism that we experience, it's just that, as you mentioned, the neoliberal desire to justify one's worth through their productivity. And we really want to, we really want to resist that.

Hannah McGregor: [25:01](#)

I love that. I love that starting with accessibility means maybe there's going to be fewer events and those events are going to be like fundamentally and transformatively accessible and isn't that better for, [Laughs] isn't that better for everyone? Like, couldn't we just have fewer events, aren't we all very tired?

Sean Lee: [25:20](#)

[Laughs] Exactly! I think there are lots of events happening and also I think that's, that's part of being a disability-led organization, is that we do have to work in different ways. And I think that's, that's actually a, a welcome way of, of changing up our sector is—

Hannah McGregor: [25:38](#)

Yep.

Sean Lee: [25:38](#)

—not only with the work we produce, but in the model of work that we embody.

Hannah McGregor: [25:43](#)

And that, I think, ties us back really powerfully to the idea of... I mean, both of disability-led spaces, but also of disability art as the last avant-garde, the, the transformative, the fundamentally sort of aesthetically transformative possibilities of disability art.

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Which is something that I, that I have encountered again... The, the literary sphere is the space that I spend more time in, for sure. And so it is, it is exciting to me to learn how these conversations are, are evolving in, in different artistic spheres as well. Because I think the concerns in the different arts and theatre and dance and music in visual and performing arts are all, by definition, look really different. I was struck... So I was watching a short video of you...

- Sean Lee: [26:32](#) [Laughs]
- Hannah McGregor: [26:32](#) Featuring you. [Laughs] In which you were talking about the art therapy model—
- Sean Lee: [26:40](#) Mm.
- Hannah McGregor: [26:40](#) —of the relationship between disability and art and this idea that... Here, I've wrote it down: "Art being good for disability—
- Sean Lee: [26:47](#) Right.
- Hannah McGregor: [26:48](#) —versus disability being good for art." I'm wondering if you could, you could unpack that a little bit in terms of disability being good for art and the idea of disability as an avant-garde.
- Sean Lee: [27:00](#) Yeah. Oh, there's this, there's a whole history I think that we have to recognize between the relationship of art and disability. I think I'll... Maybe I'll start with this idea of a disability aesthetic that Tobin Siebers has really investigated and researched. And what Tobin's identifying here is this idea of aesthetics as being something that, that tracks our emotions. That is what is satiating. That in the western arts canon, disability has sort of been an aesthetic that's been co-opted without being ever identified as such. And what Tobin is sort of talking about here is if you imagine the *Venus de Milo*, right? The *Venus* is this very iconic sculptural piece of... The... Like, Venus, who's a Roman mythological, you know, goddess... The *Venus de Milo* is a work that doesn't have arms. And like she's instantly recognizable because of that.
- Hannah McGregor: [28:04](#) Mhm.
- Sean Lee: [28:04](#) And what Tobin's identifying is, is this idea of would the *Venus de Milo* be such a iconic piece, if she was "perfect," if like... quote, air quotes "perfect."
- Hannah McGregor: [28:17](#) Yeah. [Laughs]

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- Sean Lee: [28:18](#) 'Cause you wouldn't think that. [Laughs] Would, would she be such an icon if she was quote unquote "perfect." And Tobin argues that really the identity of the *Venus de Milo* is integrated into this identity as, as a figure without arms. And he argues that other folks, other artists like René Magritte has, you know, painted the marble bust of the *Venus* in like flesh tones and put red where her arms would be to maybe signify a recent amputation. And really what's being identified here is that this identity of the *Venus* is integral to who that sculpture is.
- Hannah McGregor: [29:08](#) Mhm.
- Sean Lee: [29:08](#) Conversely, you know, Tobin Siebers talks about things like like Nazi art, which is really kitsch and it's, it's really terrible stuff. And Tobin sort of identifies that Nazi art really aimed to create the quote unquote "perfect body," right?
- Hannah McGregor: [29:26](#) Mhm.
- Sean Lee: [29:26](#) They were like, they were like almost grotesquely perfect and muscular, and you know, this, this idea of aesthetics embodied by them was, was quite repulsive. And, and so what Siebers is sort of identifying here is this desire that the western canon has for imperfection, that—
- Hannah McGregor: [29:49](#) Mhm.
- Sean Lee: [29:49](#) —that, you know, physical and mental difference is actually a value in itself. And that, you know, aesthetics in that way, are, are looking into this idea, not of perfection, but of harmony and of what is satiating.
- Hannah McGregor: [30:06](#) Mhm.
- Sean Lee: [30:06](#) But unfortunately!—
- Hannah McGregor: [30:09](#) [Laughs]
- Sean Lee: [30:09](#) —all that having been said, disabled folks have never been recognized as being part of this process. Instead, we can think about like the outsider art movement and art brut. And in those cases, you know, it was always an able-bodied part of the arts sector that would, you know, outright steal the works of disabled folks—
- Hannah McGregor: [30:31](#) Mhm.

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- Sean Lee: [30:31](#) —who are imprisoned in institutions. And until it was that a curator sort of identified this piece as having value and assigned value, it, it did.
- Hannah McGregor: [30:41](#) Yep.
- Sean Lee: [30:42](#) And oftentimes these artists were excluded from, you know, being part of the, the arts, as not getting paid, not being invited to their openings, like actively, you know, being disallowed to their own art, artistic development.
- Hannah McGregor: [30:59](#) Mhm.
- Sean Lee: [30:59](#) And, you know, as things have progressed, this relationship between art and disability has continued. You know, we can think about the freak shows and the bodies that are on display, as well as this idea of art therapy being, I think, the most innocuous way that the arts has sort of co-opted from disabled people.
- Hannah McGregor: [31:21](#) Mhm.
- Sean Lee: [31:21](#) And I'm not saying that art therapy is inherently bad; I think there's actually great things about art therapy. But the relationship between art and therapy has always been that disabled folks engage in art therapy because it's good for them, that it'll help to mitigate whatever factors are impacting their lives. But they're seen as something outside of intention, the works are seen as outside of a politic or a message. And really it's only seen as something for the person creating it. And it's in that way, it's not valued.
- Hannah McGregor: [31:57](#) Mhm.
- Sean Lee: [31:57](#) And so what I really am identifying here is that, historically, art has been seen as good for disability. But when we frame disability art as the last avant-garde, when we frame disability art as not being art therapy, then we're suddenly identifying disability as being good for art.
- Hannah McGregor: [32:17](#) Mm.
- Sean Lee: [32:17](#) And I think that's really powerful because it allows us to think about a disability culture. It allows us to come to pride in many ways. And it allows us to think about how it is that we're engaging with each other. Disability is all about interdependence and interrelationships.

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- Hannah McGregor: [32:34](#) Mm...
- Sean Lee: [32:34](#) And so when we're instead thinking about disability arts as this generative piece that's helping us to reframe our practices, that's disrupting our arts ecology, then suddenly it's so valuable. And, you know, we understand all the histories that have informed disabled folks and the way they've worked in the past and we can work to overcome and to, to really reject those past values that have erased disability art history.
- Hannah McGregor: [33:03](#) Yeah. I am thinking... As you were talking about like being good for art and the difference between, mm... Disability being good for "art, the industry" versus disability being good for "art, the culture" and—
- Sean Lee: [33:21](#) Right.
- Hannah McGregor: [33:21](#) —and, and this, this tendency, this tension when it comes to transforming industries where there is, I think, a tendency to sort of instrumentalize diversity—
- Sean Lee: [33:36](#) Mhm, yes.
- Hannah McGregor: [33:36](#) —as opposed to, or at the same time as, embracing an aesthetics. You know what I mean?
- Sean Lee: [33:42](#) Yeah.
- Hannah McGregor: [33:42](#) Like, like that there is this, this way when we talk about something being good for art, it's like, "Okay, what, what's the art there?"
- Sean Lee: [33:50](#) [Laughs]
- Hannah McGregor: [33:50](#) You know?
- Sean Lee: [33:51](#) Yeah.
- Hannah McGregor: [33:51](#) 'Cause it, cause it is like, like so many other things, both an industry and a practice.
- Sean Lee: [33:57](#) Oh, for sure. And I mean, I think for me, this falls back to this idea of, you know, when we, when we're talking about resisting the industries, right? It, it really brings me to this idea of disability justice—
- Hannah McGregor: [34:11](#) Mhm.

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- Sean Lee: [34:11](#) —and the way that we can resist neoliberal and capitalist tendencies through disability justice. And for folks who maybe don't, who haven't heard of it before, it is I think very different from disability rights—
- Hannah McGregor: [34:24](#) Mhm.
- Sean Lee: [34:24](#) —which kind of emerged in the seventies and was about establishing the human rights for disability. Disability justice identifies the way that, you know, the disability rights movement has largely been focused on a very white and middle class sector of disabled folks.
- Hannah McGregor: [34:44](#) Mhm.
- Sean Lee: [34:44](#) And, you know, it is by and for BiPOC, Black, Indigenous, people of colour, disabled, queer, and trans folks. And I think what's really important here in this idea of disability justice is that... And Mia Mingus who's a disability justice scholar says this best.
- Hannah McGregor: [35:06](#) Yeah.
- Sean Lee: [35:06](#) So I'm going to quote her as best as I can. She sort of says, like, "We don't simply want to join the ranks of the privileged. We want to dismantle these systems that uphold ableism."
- Hannah McGregor: [35:18](#) Mm...
- Sean Lee: [35:18](#) And disability justice has really gifted us, I think, with a really important definition of ableism that folks might not be familiar with. So, I'm going to paraphrase it. It's from disability justice activists and workers, particularly Talila Louis—TL—and Dustin P. Gibson. And the way they define ableism is so important. They, they define it as a system that places values on people's bodies and minds and body-minds based on societally constructed ideas of normal, of intelligence, of excellence, and of productivity.
- Hannah McGregor: [35:57](#) Mm...
- Sean Lee: [35:57](#) And because of that, these constructed ideas are deeply rooted in anti-Blackness eugenics, colonialism, and capitalism. And so this form of systemic oppression leads to society and other folks determining who is valuable and worthy based on someone's ability to produce and to behave and to excel in a capitalist model. And what's great here is that they've identified you don't have to be disabled to experience ableism. And I think

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that was a really powerful moment for me. It was that when we understand, you know, the systems of oppression that, that uphold this framework that we're living in, white supremacy, intersecting with capitalism, with racism, with patriarchy and hegemony... When we understand ableism as part of that and actually as something that a lot of these are rooted in, then we suddenly recognize why ableism has to be included in this analysis of oppression that we have. And, and—

Hannah McGregor: [37:02](#)

Yeah.

Sean Lee: [37:02](#)

—that's really important because oftentimes ableism is the way that oppression is justified, you know? And, and I think when we begin to unpack ableism, then we're beginning to unpack sort of the larger framework of injustice in our community. And that's also why we need to centre BiPOC and queer and trans folks within disability arts, because they are the ones who are leading this conversation and the ones who are really creating the framework that we're engaging with for transformative change and for transformative justice. Right?

Hannah McGregor: [37:37](#)

Yeah. You're, you're making me think of a sort of framing of solidarity activism, which is, you know, it can't be about trying to save other people. It has to emerge from an understanding that if you are not free, I am not free.

Sean Lee: [37:54](#)

Mhm!

Hannah McGregor: [37:54](#)

And ableism... I mean, this is a conversation we have around a lot of different kinds of, sort of transformative activism. You know?

Sean Lee: [38:01](#)

Mhm.

Hannah McGregor: [38:01](#)

Understanding that actually, white supremacy is, is bad for everyone,—

Sean Lee: [38:05](#)

Mhm.

Hannah McGregor: [38:05](#)

—that the cis-heteropatriarchy is bad for everybody. Like, even if you are the person who is structurally positioned in a dominant space in relation to those systems, it's still killing you. Like it's, it's poison, these systems are poison.

Sean Lee: [38:19](#)

Mhm.

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- Hannah McGregor: [38:19](#) And that, really... My own encounters as a like neurotypical and able-bodied academic with disability justice work has transformed so many aspects of how I think about my job, including how I think about my relationship to my own productivity in my own body.
- Sean Lee: [38:37](#) Mhm!
- Hannah McGregor: [38:37](#) Because there is this, this incredibly sort of radical anticapitalist critique at the, at the root of disability justice that really is like [Laughs] going to set us all free and keep us from... In whatever forms, you know, working ourselves to death,—
- Sean Lee: [38:52](#) Yeah.
- Hannah McGregor: [38:52](#) —letting capitalism consume us whole. And that feels more pertinent than ever in this historical moment—
- Sean Lee: [39:01](#) Yeah.
- Hannah McGregor: [39:01](#) —in which we are grappling with, with a collective experience of sickness, with a collective experience of being at home, with overtly eugenicist conversations around vaccines, indifferential access to medical care, where we're having to talk fundamentally about the intersectional forms of vulnerability, where we're coming... What's happening in the US right now, in terms of the recognition that this pandemic intersects with anti-Black police violence. Like we're, we're all so much in the thick of these exact questions right now.
- Sean Lee: [39:36](#) Yeah. And, you know, I think one way that, that the work we're doing at Tangled and the work that we're doing at Bodies in Translation is by resisting these ideas of, of capitalism... And, and we just had an exhibition curated by Gloria Swain—
- Hannah McGregor: [39:54](#) Mm!
- Sean Lee: [39:54](#) —called *Hidden* it's around these ideas of Black and Brown bodies and invisible disabilities because of the way that mental health impacts Black folks so, so predominantly. And, and it's, it's largely driven by, you know, state-sanctioned violence and systemic racism and police brutality. Gloria created this space for healing. And during this process, one of the artists couldn't make it to the exhibition anymore. And during this Gloria and I were chatting about how to best proceed and Gloria sort of said, "Well, you know, the ethos of this piece, isn't about bringing more artists in, it's about it's about creating space."

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- Hannah McGregor: [40:38](#) Mhm.
- Sean Lee: [40:38](#) And so Gloria instead kept the wall blank. Gloria wrote up this really beautiful piece about holding space. And I thought it was a powerful demonstration of disability justice and it was really about how we can hold space for others and reserving that space for that artist. I think it was really, it was really an incredible demonstration that could only be done when you're opening up your processes for other folks from the community. And I think about that a lot—
- Hannah McGregor: [41:09](#) Yeah.
- Sean Lee: [41:09](#) —as a way that we can resist not just ableism through accessible practices, but through embodying access in, in that very tangible way. Right?
- Hannah McGregor: [41:21](#) Yes, yes, absolutely. So I read a, a piece in *Canadian Art* about that exhibit—I'll link to it in the show notes...
- Sean Lee: [41:29](#) Oh, that'd be great.
- Hannah McGregor: [41:30](#) Yeah. And, and, and that really struck me, that sense of de-emphasizing co-presence as like a precondition to experiencing art.
- Sean Lee: [41:42](#) Mhm.
- Hannah McGregor: [41:42](#) Which, which brings me back, I think, to a conversation we were having just before we started recording, I believe, about this idea that, that the current moment in which we, for public health reasons, none of us can prioritize co-presence are really reminding us that there are in fact lots and lots of other ways of making community and creating spaces that don't have to necessarily be literal physical spaces.
- Sean Lee: [42:09](#) Yeah. You know, historically disabled folks have really gathered online and so I think, you know, disabled people have really already paved the way for how it is that we can do this gathering. But it is a little upsetting sometimes to see as all these changes are being made, that these are changes that have been advocated for all the time—
- Hannah McGregor: [42:31](#) Yep.
- Sean Lee: [42:31](#) —and told by folks that it was impossible to make this thing virtual or, you know, to create accommodations in this way.

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But, suddenly! You know, it is possible. And I just hope that, you know, now that some organizations are doing this work, are, you know, holding things virtually or making some things accessible in that format, that now that they maybe have the capacity and the experience—

Hannah McGregor: [43:00](#)

Yeah.

Sean Lee: [43:00](#)

—that they can really continue to do that because it... The folks that need this virtually aren't just going to suddenly stop.

Hannah McGregor: [43:09](#)

Yep.

Sean Lee: [43:09](#)

Like you're, you're building a new audience through this virtual work. And so you want to hold onto that audience and you want to value them supporting you in this time.

Hannah McGregor: [43:20](#)

I'm thinking of the Festival of Literary Diversity—which is a wonderful literary festival that happens out of Hamilton, Ontario—and they, they have been doing a really great job for the last few years of like... They make sure that there, there are disability justice activists who are on the board, who are consulting with them from the get-go, so that they are, as we've discussed, sort of incorporating accessibility more fundamentally into the festival. And this year, they went fully online and did a really impressive job of figuring out ways to make gathering online possible in a way that felt... Like, a lot of people gave the feedback that it felt significantly less stressful than a lot of other forms—

Sean Lee: [43:58](#)

Oh, agreed.

Hannah McGregor: [43:58](#)

—of online meeting.

Sean Lee: [44:00](#)

Yeah.

Hannah McGregor: [44:00](#)

And they made some really deliberate choices around, around what that looked like. And they have also said, that in response to their, their audience, who has said, like "This made this festival a lot more accessible to me." They're like, when we are back in person, we're going to keep having the online option.

Sean Lee: [44:18](#)

Yeah.

Hannah McGregor: [44:18](#)

Because exactly this, right? They realized in the process of opening up that there was this audience that they had been excluding and in the process are like, well, we're not... You

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know, even when we can go back to this other model of doing things, we're not going to throw away what we learned from moving things online.

Sean Lee: [44:36](#) Yeah, exactly. And I think for the folks who are doing this work... I'm on the board of a, another disability organization called Creative Users.

Hannah McGregor: [44:49](#) Mhm.

Sean Lee: [44:49](#) And Creative Users... I believe, actually, they're, they're just about to launch a new, revamped website. But they, they, they, they sort of do a lot of work... But one of the really driving projects right now is their accessing the arts project, which is about creating, you know, arts listings and accessible events listings online. And they're really a national model for if you're trying to do some outreach that way. You know, I, I highly recommend checking out Creative Users. And they also have a lot of resources around how to make virtual gatherings more accessible, you know?

Hannah McGregor: [45:28](#) Awesome. Love it.

Sean Lee: [45:28](#) Like, just because it is online, it doesn't mean it's accessible, right? Like I've heard folks kind of conflate the two—

Hannah McGregor: [45:34](#) Mm!

Sean Lee: [45:34](#) —that like, "Oh, it's online now, so it's accessible."

Hannah McGregor: [45:37](#) Mhm.

Sean Lee: [45:37](#) But actually, you know, are you centring folks who are deaf or hard of hearing, or blind or low vision, in these kind of online activations? And also like, are you just moving your, your work directly on or are you actually suiting that virtual medium, right?

Hannah McGregor: [45:54](#) Yep.

Sean Lee: [45:54](#) So those are things to, to think about and consider when, you know, trying to make the best programming that everyone's just doing the best they can.

Hannah McGregor: [46:01](#) Yeah.

Sean Lee: [46:01](#) These are just things to think about.

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- Hannah McGregor: [46:03](#) I will, I will check that out. And, and it, it will go in the show notes, everything goes in the show notes.
- Sean Lee: [46:07](#) [Laughs]
- Hannah McGregor: [46:07](#) Every name that you've given is going to go into the show notes.
- Sean Lee: [46:10](#) [Laughs]
- Hannah McGregor: [46:10](#) It'll all be in there. But I feel like this would also be a really useful tool for people figuring out how to do teaching online. Which is a similar thing, right? You can't take the classroom and just stick it on the internet and be like, "There, I did it." Like, there's a different set of questions.
- Sean Lee: [46:27](#) Yeah. And I mean like, gathering virtually is great. But sometimes when it's not made to suit the medium, when there are parameters around, you know, you can't turn your camera off or everyone has to participate. Like, you know, that that's also a way of making things accessible.
- Hannah McGregor: [46:43](#) Yep.
- Sean Lee: [46:43](#) And like, you know, how do we suit this media? Maybe a three-hour Zoom session that's just talking at you is actually kind of not, not so great in like a virtual setting, right? Like I personally have been to some of those events where I'm like, wow, one hour? Great. Three hours? I... [Laughs] I, I can't.
- Hannah McGregor: [47:08](#) Yep. And one hour... Like, I don't find this tiring. I find this, this fine because I am like engaging in a conversation and it keeps my attention active. Or if it's one hour and I can have my camera off and my mic muted so that I can be doing other things while I'm listening. But the worst of all worlds is that thing where like you're muted, but your camera has to stay on and so you have to be doing a good impression of paying attention the entire time. [Laughs]
- Sean Lee: [47:35](#) Oh my God, yeah.
- Hannah McGregor: [47:37](#) Which is *so exhausting*.
- Sean Lee: [47:37](#) [Laughs]
- Hannah McGregor: [47:40](#) Yeah.
- Sean Lee: [47:41](#) Yeah. Like that's, that's, that's ableism right there. [Laughs]

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- Hannah McGregor: [47:46](#) It, it sure is. So before we wrap up, can I just ask you... You mentioned before the sort of relationship between what you do at Tangled and Bodies in Translation, and I'm wondering if you can talk to us a little bit about your work with Bodies in Translation.
- Sean Lee: [48:01](#) Yeah, of course. I mean, the work we do couldn't exist without Bodies in Translation. They're a research project and university kind of multidisciplinary project that helps to cultivate and research activist art. And in this term, "activist art" referring to disability arts, deaf arts, mad arts, but also aging and elder, fat art, Indigenous art, you know, the, the... I think they do really incredible work and they are really all about creating the space and the histories that I sort of noted were lacking in disability culture, right?
- Hannah McGregor: [48:38](#) Mhm.
- Sean Lee: [48:38](#) Like personally, I think if Bodies in Translation had been around, I would have been able to access some of the incredible catalogs. They've helped Tangled to create powerful documentation of works. And they've done really vital research in activist art and also in activating it because they've also helped to co-produce some pieces, they've done wonderful exhibitions, and yeah... Just the work that we do with Bodies in Translation wouldn't be possible. And like Eliza Chandler, who was a past artistic director at Tangled, is one of the co-, kind of co-directors along with Dr. Carla Rice there. And they just, they do such incredible work with an incredible team. So, you know, I highly recommend looking at the work that BIT—that's their acronym—has done around... For example, our Crippling the Arts symposium that we partnered with last year, along with Ryerson University, and Creative Users Projects, and Harbourfront. And I hope I'm not forgetting other [Laughs] co-presenters... With the British Council, as well. [Laughs]
- Hannah McGregor: [49:48](#) I'll put it in the show notes.
- Sean Lee: [49:53](#) [Laughs] But they recently created a really incredible art catalog in their art and translation part of their website. And that's like a digital catalog series they've been working on with really incredible documentation and analyses, critical analyses, of what's happened.
- Hannah McGregor: [50:09](#) Amazing. Yeah, it's such a great... As a project, it's such a great example of what it looks like to meaningfully partner with communities and organizations outside the university and, and

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leverage the resources the university has into actual transformative work. I love to see—

- Sean Lee: [50:24](#) Yeah!
- Hannah McGregor: [50:26](#) —examples of research projects that are meaningfully thinking of sort of partnering with, rather than studying or working on, communities. It's so important as a way of rethinking what, you know, what academics could be doing.
- Sean Lee: [50:38](#) Yeah. So they've, they've co-presented with us in having a curator-in-residence who's helping to research new curatorial access as well as working with Tangled to research, you know, new artists and to propose an exhibition that we will hopefully be able to hold in the next two years or so.
- Hannah McGregor: [51:02](#) [Laughs] Yeah, fingers, fingers crossed.
- Sean Lee: [51:03](#) Fingers crossed.
- Hannah McGregor: [51:05](#) This has been absolutely wonderful.
- Sean Lee: [51:07](#) Thank you. Yeah, it's been so great to be here and just to chat about disability arts. 'Cause I think, really, it's so powerful and for folks who haven't engaged with it before, I really do hope that, you know, maybe listening to this podcast, they come at it with a different perspective that they, they do try to open beyond the ideas of, you know, art is good for disability, but rather that disability is good for art. [Sean's Theme Music: "It's Gonna Be Okay, Baby" by MUNA]
- Hannah McGregor: [51:52](#) If you want to learn more about Sean's work, you can check out tangledarts.org and bodiesintranslation.ca. Those links, as well as all of the promised show notes, are on the website at secretfeministagenda.com. You can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor and you can tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. And of course, you can review the show. We have a new review this week from zaracenia—that's a guess at pronunciation—in Germany. Thank you so much. The podcast's theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans off their album *Chub Rub*. You can download the entire album on freemusicarchive.org or follow them on Facebook. Sean's theme song was "It's Gonna Be Okay, Baby" by MUNA or maybe Mewna...hard to say. This episode was recorded on the traditional and unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations where I'm grateful

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to live and work. This has been Secret Feminist Agenda. Pass it on. [Theme Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]