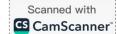# Accessibility at the Intersection of the Physical, the Digital, and the Financial

COVEN BERLIN

COVEN BERLIN

Fig. 20
COVEN BERLIN logo

COVEN BERLIN is an artistic and curatorial collective and online magazine based in the queer-feminist community of Berlin. Our group moves through enacting emotional, playful, and political micro-practices of collectivity. We create at the intersection of our digital platform and physical formats like transdisciplinary exhibitions and events. The curatorial goals of our gallery exhibitions are therefore deeply intertwined with the editorial goals of our online magazine. An essential part of our feminism has to do with care and access, two concepts that are also essential parts of the relationship between the physical and the digital aspects of our work. We have chosen to describe here in some detail the strategies we've learned together toward care and access, not out of a theoretical interest in the topic nor from the position of "experts," but rather out of a deep-seated belief that care is practice-based, long-term, and often concrete. We share our experiences here to advocate for centering access in queer spaces, both online and in person.

To start out, we would like to acknowledge that perhaps the most impactful way COVEN BERLIN has come to learn about accessibility as a curatorial method is through our long-term relationship with the Berlin-based collective Sickness Affinity Group (SAG). SAG is a support and resource group of art workers and activists who work on the topics of sickness/disability and/or are affected by them. The goal is to share information and support, working against an art world designed to make individual artists atomized competitors. The essence of the practical considerations access-centered collectives can take can be found in SAG member transdisciplinary artist, researcher, and writer Romily Alice Walden's *A Primer on Working with Disabled Group Members for Feminist/ Activist Groups and Organizations*,[1] where they make an utterly clear case that a space or organization cannot be feminist if it is not accessible to disabled people. The more effusive feeling of access intimacy, that "elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else 'gets' your access needs,"[2] is something learned through feeling it, in a space where it has been created, and cannot be taught through theory.

How to define access is a tricky question. For our physical exhibitions, accessibility can show up in such basic practices as making access information available with our event information (e.g., is the space wheelchair accessible, are the toilets gender neutral, will there be a variety of seating options). For workshops, we gather access needs from participants before the event via email (e.g., do they need childcare, do they require a scent-reduced environment), and aim to set aside a small budget to address and facilitate these needs.

1   Romily Alice Walden, *A Primer on Working with Disabled Group Members for Feminist/Activist Groups and Organizations* (London: Sick Time Press, 2018).

2   Mia Mingus, "Access Intimacy: The Missing Link," *Leaving Evidence* (blog), May 5, 2011, https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/.

It can be as simple as asking a collaborator if they have any access needs we should know about, or if they have an "access doc" we should read (a document outlining someone's disability or access needs, which may be presented when you start working with them on a project).[3] Creating arts spaces that are physically accessible is a critical topic, but one we would rather leave to experts such as Platz da! or Aktion Mensch in Berlin.[4]

When dealing with our online platform, however, questions of access can look quite different. Online spaces traffic in their own specific types of ableist norms and exclusions. One question we grapple with often as digital publishers is that of language. English can be exclusionary and imperialist while paradoxically serving as a lingua franca. Language and other media must be thought of more carefully when making an accessible website for people who have low vision, which often requires taking steps that constitute a large administrative and technical undertaking. At a minimum, all images used on the website should have written descriptions embedded, and the site should be designed to be compatible with screen readers (devices that read the text of a website aloud to the user). Many free website tools and layouts do not offer full screen-reader compatibility, or even consider accessibility as an aspect of the template designs they offer. While an accessibility consultation for our online platform has been on our wish list for some time, COVEN BERLIN simply has not had the capacity to create and maintain this infrastructure without funding.

The question of funding, financial security, and what it means to concretely support each other thus also comes into the topic of access. Not only to have access budgets for exhibitions, to create and maintain accessible online digital infrastructure, but also to be able to include artists in our work who cannot afford to work for free. This article will focus on aspects of accessibility at the intersection of the physical, the digital, and the financial, reflecting the complex factors that inform our thinking and practice on this topic in our daily practice. But first, a bit about us.

What Is COVEN BERLIN, a.k.a. Our Curatorial Strategy

COVEN BERLIN was initially conceived of as a blog where queers in Berlin (geographically or psychologically) could connect and create content about art, the body, and feminism. Since the Craigslist ad that brought us together in 2013, we have focused our energy on engaging with art and activism in a playful, nondogmatic, approachable way that we call *critical messiness*. Critical messiness plays a tangible role in our collective both aesthetically and conceptually; it is a gallery that is too full, internal deadlines that are rarely respected, and decisions made without a protocol. Creatively, it is the

spatial and temporal expression of our understanding of collective work; internally, it is the effort exerted when and where possible, with whatever means available, to care for the many-headed hydra of this collective, the community it is situated in, and larger contexts. Our unstructured and forgiving approach to time is informed by the writing of other collective-minded cultural workers, such as Taraneh Fazeli's "Sick Time, Sleepy Time, Crip Time: Against Capitalism's Temporal Bullying," in which she proposes the anti-capitalist potential of taking our time, listening to our bodies, and rejecting productivity norms.[5]

An inspiration for our approach to queer feminism is Chicana feminist lesbian writer and cultural theorist Gloria E. Anzaldúa's concept of border consciousness— an awareness of diversity of voices and formats, the promotion of an emergence of pluralistic learning, and imagining the future.[6] Border consciousness arises from a subjectivity structured by several determinants (gender, class, sexuality, etc.) in varying cultures and identities, which creates an unclear, unclean, unneutral, un-minimalistic, inefficient body, unsuited for capitalist productivity, whose ambiguity, hybridity, and contradictions are welcomed. We cherish what can be learned from the infinite variations of this body. Strategies that have come out of this learning include alienation, appropriation, distortion, or exaggeration of the status quo—all of which translates to a celebration of queer ambivalence in our curatorial and artistic practices.

In a world that often insists on clarity, efficiency, and the neat tying up of loose ends, we advocate for ambivalence and uncertainty. Our work is about questioning normativity in society beyond ideas of gender, "womanhood," or sexual orientation, into landscapes of migration and colonialism, the inter-section of the body and the digital, gender and the pharmaceutical, and the deconstruction of linear, binary structures. To care for these concepts also entails addressing the working conditions of contemporary art production both online and off, insofar as they are barriers of access to the conversation itself.

3 "What Is an Access Doc," Access Docs for Artists, 2018, accessed March 13, 2020, https://www.accessdocsforartists.com /what-is-an-access-doc/.

4 Platz da!, https://platzda2017.wordpress .com; Aktion Mensch, 2020, https://www .aktion-mensch.de.

5 Taraneh Fazeli, "Notes for 'Sick Time, Sleepy Time, Crip Time: Against Capitalism's Temporal Bullying' in Conversation with the Canaries," Temporary Art Review, May 26, 2016, http://temporaryartreview.com/notes -for-sick-time-sleepy-time-crip-time -against-capitalisms-temporal-bullying-in -conversation-with-the-canaries/.

6 Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

Translating Installed Artwork into Digital Spaces: An Accessibility Strategy

Virtual space can offer opportunities to transcend some of the access barriers present in physical space. We look to the work of chronically ill and disabled artists and writers such as Korean American writer, artist, and astrologer Johanna Hedva, who asks in their seminal work, "Sick Woman Theory": "How do you throw a brick through the window of a bank if you can't get out of bed?"[7] In response to this prompt, we aim to create online iterations of our work to engage with those who are not able to get out of bed, are not able to get away from work, are not able to leave the children alone. Engaging in artistic events, exhibitions, and activism in person requires energy, time, and access that many disabled, sick, poor, and otherwise marginalized queer artists simply do not have. Online contributions and digital collaborations are valid forms of making and engagement. By giving artwork a digital form, it can live outside the gallery and become accessible to wider audiences.

One such example is the artwork *An Inquiry into KSK* by German artist Inga Zimprich, which COVEN exhibited in 2018 as part of "LUCKY," our group exhibition that looked into the social construction of luck at the neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst (nGbK) in Berlin. Zimprich created an installation critiquing the exclusionary German health insurance system, offering practical advice for how to become affordably insured. In the gallery space, the visitor could sit down at a small lavender desk and read a zine about joining the Künstlersozialkasse (KSK), the social insurance scheme for artists in Germany. The KSK provides partial insurance support for professional artists, writers, performers, designers, actors, and musicians (though interestingly, curators are not included).

The zine begins by discussing the barriers and potential shame inherent in even discussing a topic so intimately related to income and health, especially for women and other marginalized people who often face additional difficulties in dealing with both government bureaucracy and employment. It includes a detailed description of the documents required, and a line-by-line explanation of the application form itself. Zimprich therefore offers strategies for dealing with the KSK and bureaucratic inaccessibility on an emotional as well as a practical level. The zine is published as a PDF available for download in our online magazine, in an article titled "Joining the KSK: A Radical Guide on Getting Your Shit Together."[8]

Translating this work to a digital format facilitated easy access to and distribution of this resource. We wanted the zine to reach uninsured artists and cultural workers who felt isolated or intimidated by bureaucratic barriers to access, beyond the physical walls of the gallery. The quiet and ongoing struggles with insurance,

housing, and appropriate and prompt compensation for our work as creative practitioners should be a topic of conversation, and an opportunity for loved ones and communities to offer solidarity and support, rather than living with loneliness, shame, and fear. By publishing *Joining the KSK*, we both made the conversation public and made the resource more accessible. It is one of the most visited pages on our website.

Accessible Language in Digital Publishing

COVEN BERLIN's online platform holds space for queer bodies and voices in a multimedia, community-centered digital setting. We publish in English because we are Berlin-based, and English is a common additional language here and in the collective. However, one criterion that has never informed how we select contributors is comfort with, proficiency in, or mother-tongue-level English. We have preferred to learn about English from what our contributors bring to English grammar, syntax, and spelling. The imperialist history of English and its resulting predominance in the contemporary cultural sphere is something to push against, rather than gain legitimacy from. Choosing to not "correct" language is our strategy to avoid gatekeeping and prioritizing university-level English proficiency over other forms of spoken and written English. We are therefore lodged inside a paradox: we need a connective language, but we also grapple with the implications of this language's position as a colonizing tool.

In practice, certain grammatical norms must be released in favor of prioritizing the author's voice, with all its marks of personal background. Working on a case-by-case basis entails an intuitive, deeply felt approach to what each work calls for. A good example is the touching, intimate poem by Asaf Aharonson, a choreographer from Tel Aviv who has dyslexia. Asaf writes phonetically, and therefore encourages readers to imagine them speaking the words as written on the page. In a poem written to their lover at an STD clinic, they write "Heving a glimps et u Lying with the infujen conetcted to ur vein / (cos I woos relist first) mide me think / if il gat to see u es an old porsen."[9]

Our goal is to highlight the strengths of our writers and artists inside a language that connects us to one another. This does not mean wholly excluding academic writing, nor does it entail a fetishization of other writing styles. We want to call

7 Johanna Hedva, "Sick Woman Theory," *Mask Magazine*, January 2016, http://www.maskmagazine.com/not-again/struggle/sick-woman-theory.

8 Harley Aussoleil, "Joining the KSK: A Radical Guide on Getting Your Shit Together," COVEN BERLIN, July 19, 2018, http://www.covenberlin.com/joining-the-ksk/.

9 Asaf Aharonson, excerpt from *CLINIC: Dates, Doctors, Drag*, June 19, 2018, http://www.covenberlin.com/clinic-dates-doctors-drag/.

attention to the fact that academic English is never neutral or non-stylized, and to problematize the idea that only that which is expressed "correctly" has value.

In the future, we would like to prioritize submissions in simple language, which is more accessible for "people with different needs, such as students, children, adults with learning difficulties, and people who are trying to learn English."[10] The idea is to nurture an online universe that more of us can participate in. Another important conversation in pursuit of this goal is financing, and how the ability to work "for free" affects access as well. Although it is obvious that money cannot be equated with a plurality of voices, financial precarity certainly affects marginalized contributors more than others.

Financial Sustainability as Accessibility

Being able to offer payment, even if it is relatively small, is a requisite for how we care for and value our collaborators. COVEN BERLIN began as a nonmonetary collective of friends, relying on one another for opportunities but not expecting these opportunities to pay our bills. This proved unsustainable and exhausting for us and for our collaborators. We heed the calls of cultural workers organizing for fair pay such as the Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.), which works to end unpaid artistic labor and the dubious practice of "payment through exposure."[11]

In a conscious attempt to move away from precarity and toward accessible infrastructures, COVEN BERLIN has been funded by various state art grants since 2018. Paying collaborators is absolutely tied to accessibility, as not all artists can afford to work for free, especially those who are already systemically marginalized. Expecting others to do so only exacerbates inequalities in creative spaces. Although we ourselves do work for free on occasion, we consider this at its core an exploitative practice, as this means we are essentially paying to work.

Receiving funding has also caused us to redefine ourselves as a collective, and to question and evaluate our working structures. In the beginning, we identified as a "living room–based collective" and worked primarily with artists, project spaces, and audiences from our immediate queer communities in Berlin. Without losing this connection, we have grown out of operating solely with spaces and people in our immediate vicinity. As our structure continues to change, we guide our activities and decisions according to a reflexive curatorial process, asking ourselves: What do we want to achieve, collectively and individually? What are our criteria for selecting works? What are our biases? How can we problematize the power of the curator and remain catalyzers, facilitators, and collaborators?

Working with funding and paying ourselves has also created opportunities to question how we value the caring labor within our collective, where we are not only curators, but researchers, facilitators, writers, editors, communicators, artists/creators, website administrators, and parts of a whole. How we apportion that payment and based on which kinds of work is a continuous conversation, encompassing our individual and collective needs and values, as well as the resources and institutional support available to us. Taking time to discuss issues on practical and emotional levels, checking in regularly, and basic communication and care strategies are not separate from how we handle institutions or funding.

Even though COVEN BERLIN is not a coven of practicing witches, we do believe in the spiritual power of community. Very often, when people think about being a queer-feminist art collective, they think about transmitting big ideals and theory through artwork, writing, or exhibitions. However, a feminist ethos also must guide the structure of our work. How we care affects the form of the collective and is enacted in everyday, mundane, organizational decisions. Practices like writing an image description, helping each other apply for health insurance, or even taking the time to write this article are every bit as important as our exhibitions—a translation of our feminist goals into our collective care structures.

10 "Simple English Wikipedia," Wikipedia, accessed May 20, 2020, https://en .wikipedia.org/wiki/Simple_English _Wikipedia.

11 W.A.G.E., "About," accessed March 13, 2020, https://wageforwork.com/about.