

Tactile Programming Proposal

Tessa Haas

A Day of Tactility, Summer '18, Fisher Brooks Gallery, Morris Gallery, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA)

Art museums and institutions allow visitors to look at art, read about it, and learn. These are the three expectations that most visitors have entering a museum space. These expectations shift for visitors who are blind and visually-impaired, but they do not disappear.

While PAFA currently offers special accessibility tours, they are on a request-only basis. Visitors needing accessibility must call ahead to plan their visit. In an effort to begin creating a more inclusive and accessible experience for visitors, A Day of Tactility will invite visitors who have previously felt excluded from arts institutions to PAFA.

Georgina Kleege has led and consulted accessible tours at various museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Tate Modern. She is an English professor at UC Berkeley. As a blind woman raised by artist parents, she believes that art ought to be touched. Though this isn't wholly possible due to conservation concerns, accessible tours are a way to create inclusive museum programming and experiences.

“There’s a larger political and philosophical issue as well — we have all this rhetoric about diversity and people advocate for it, and you want to include all these people because their perspectives have not been in the culture before. With disability, it’s understood as a lack or something missing, so then it’s like we’re giving you access and that’s the end, and I say, well, no. Blind people’s experience has not been a part of the cultural conversation before, and we have something to say too,” says Kleege. (via Hyperallergic.com)

As of 2015, Pennsylvania is the fifth state with the highest percentage of blind residents (via <https://nfb.org/blindness-statistics>). I believe there is a cultural imperative to create a more inclusive, accessible, and equitable museum experience, and I believe that an historical, prestigious institution like PAFA could pave the way for other Philadelphia institutions to create more accessible programming.

I am proposing a full-day programming event to inaugurate regular, accessible programming for visitors with & without disabilities. This event will take place in conjunction with *SWARM.*, allowing visitors to experience the exhibition regardless of disability. Didier William and Nestor Armando Gil, the two artists whose work is featured in *SWARM.*, use materials that are tactile in nature - bread, grass, cement, wood. Asking the two artists to provide material samples, older works that can be interacted with tactilely, and statements in braille will allow visually-impaired and blind visitors to interact with, read, and learn about *SWARM.*

Logistically, this could be co-sponsored by Associated Services for the Blind & Visually Impaired or the Pennsylvania Association for the Blind, both Philadelphia-based non-profit institutions. Alternatively, I have grant-writing experience (I interned at the Washington Regional Association of Grantmakers in 2015) - and I could search for

external funds. This program requires little funds, and improvisations can be made to minimize cost.

More Information about *SWARM* :

To “swarm” is to teem, to converge, to confront en masse, period. The work of artists Didier William (b. 1983) and Nestor Armando Gil (b. 1971) beckons viewers, as an imperative, to physically and intellectually “swarm” conceptions of colonialism in order to disarm such narratives of power. The artists’ mixed media practices in printmaking, painting, collage, sculpture, installation, and performance are inflected by their Haitian and Cuban heritages as well as the diasporic communities they call home in the United States.

Their experiential works provide encounters with constructed and imaginary histories of immigration. Together, their work allows for an inclusive viewing experience that disables the divisive logic of “we” versus “them” embedded within past and current discussions of immigration. William and Gil’s works then offer viewers a glimpse at a “nuevo colonialismo,” or a “new colonialism,” which enables self-determined collective and individual identity formations from within the rather than from outside the diaspora. Rather than adhering to previous historical outcomes, William and Gil investigate the processes of building community across diaspora, dislocation, and relocation (via PAFA.com, more information [here](#)).

Step-by-step breakdown A Day of Tactility:

- 10 a.m.: Opening Remarks (Katie Samson, PAFA coordinator of accessible tours, and [Carmen Papalia](#), a Social Practice artist who makes participatory projects on the topic of access as it relates to public space, the Art institution and visual culture)
- 11 a.m.: Tactile Tour of *Swarm*.
- 12 p.m.: Break for Lunch
- 1:30 p.m.: Guided Walk through *SWARM*. from Fisher Brooks Gallery to Morris Gallery with Carmen Papalia.

You are closing your eyes. You are holding the elbow of a friend and being lead through an Art gallery. Your friend stops in front of a piece that they find particularly interesting and you feel the large thing hanging overhead. Your friend begins to describe the work as if they are telling a story and you begin to relax and listen. Each spoken word becomes an object that slowly materializes into an image in your mind's eye, and as it refines, each image fills the span of canvas that you have conceptualized. You imagine the figures that were described to you as people that you know, and the setting as somewhere that you have been. Your friend stops offering description and the fragments coalesce into a whole image. Soon you find yourself immersed in a story for which you are the author, and you enjoy the satisfaction of knowing something in a way that is meaningful to you. Finally, your friend interrupts your focus by telling you the title of the work, and the image that you have conceptualized becomes the thing being described - just out of sight. - Carmen Papalia, *A New Model for Access in the Museum*

- 3 p.m.: Materiality & Accessibility in the Museum: a conversation with Carmen Papalia, Didier William, and Nestor Armando Gil.
- 3:45 p.m.: Closing Remarks (Brooke Davis Anderson, Museum Director of PAFA, and Tessa Haas, Curatorial Intern)

Long-Term Goals:

- Tactility Tables monthly - allowing visitors to interact with materiality used in current exhibitions. The Denver Museum of Art offers this regularly, more information [here](#).
 - Accessibility Interns - implementing a program that allows disabled folks a short-term employment at PAFA to gain experience working in an arts institution before securing a long-term job. In PA, the Ticket to Work program can subsidize these costs ([more information here](#)).
- In the US in 2015, [17.5 percent of persons with a disability were employed](#)-- compared to a 65 percent employment rate for people without a disability: a troubling statistic that should influence our discussions of museum labor and museum internships (via Center for the Future of Museums, 2016).