

Alt-Text As Poetry by Shannon Finnegan

 web.archive.org/web/20210612091422/https://www.eyebeam.org/alt-text-as-poetry/

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In my art practice, I think about how we can move towards better and more nuanced approaches to access. Instead of focusing on compliance and doing the minimum, what if we approach access creatively and generously, centering disability culture? How do we make spaces and experiences that disabled people not only can access, but want to access?

A few years ago, I created an installation for the Wassaic Project called *Anti-Stairs Club Lounge*. The Wassaic Project's exhibition space is inaccessible: seven flights of stairs, with no ramp or elevator access above the ground floor.





[Image description: 1. An orange wall with big text in a stair-inspired font that says, “Anti-Stairs Club Lounge.” 2. The interior of the lounge featuring chairs, reading materials, lamps, candy, and a mini-fridge.] Photos by Verónica González Mayoral.

The lounge is exclusively for visitors who cannot or choose not to go upstairs. Visitors get the passcode to enter the lounge by signing a form at the front desk certifying they will not go to the upper floors of the exhibition. So the chilled seltzer, cushions, and sun-filled space are just for us.

During my Eyebeam Residency, I have been thinking about access in digital spaces. Along with my collaborator Bojana Coklyat, I am working on a project that reframes alt-text as a type of poetry. We want to move alt-text from the realm of compliance to a space of exploration, experimentation, and artistry.



[Image description: “ALT-TEXT AS POETRY” in white handwritten text on a deep blue background.]

By framing alt-text as a type of poetry, we can approach writing it with some of the ideas and strategies that have been developed by poets. There are three things that Bojana and I have found to be particularly helpful.

1. Attention to language

Simply by writing alt-text with thought and care, we shift the process. What words are we using? What are their connotations? What is the tone of our writing? What is the voice? How do those align with or contrast with the tone and perspective of the image?

2. Word Economy

Sighted people have a tendency to over-describe images. While there are times for long and lavish descriptions, alt-text should usually aim to be concise. For most images, one or two sentences will do. Poetry has a lot to teach us about paring down language and being expressive, while being brief.

3. Experimental Approach

We have so much to learn from poetry about being more playful and exploratory in how we write alt-text. There are lots of complex and interesting questions that come up when translating visual information into text. We need to try out different ways to doing this and learn from each other's strategies and techniques.

There are lots of people who are already writing alt-text and image descriptions poetically. I love this description by Death Valley National Park Service: "twisted wood branches in the foreground with an arc of stars in the sky above a dark distant mountain."



[Image description: Image from @deathvalleynps described above.]

I am excited about the ways alt-text and image description can go beyond what is visually present and convey additional information. You may have additional context, knowledge, or interpretation to include in the description. Kimberly Drew's description is a great example of this: "two authors who just saw a layout of their first book. the woman in the foreground wears glasses and the woman in the background wears pink sunglasses and is holding up a peace sign. both women are radiating with pride and hope for the future."

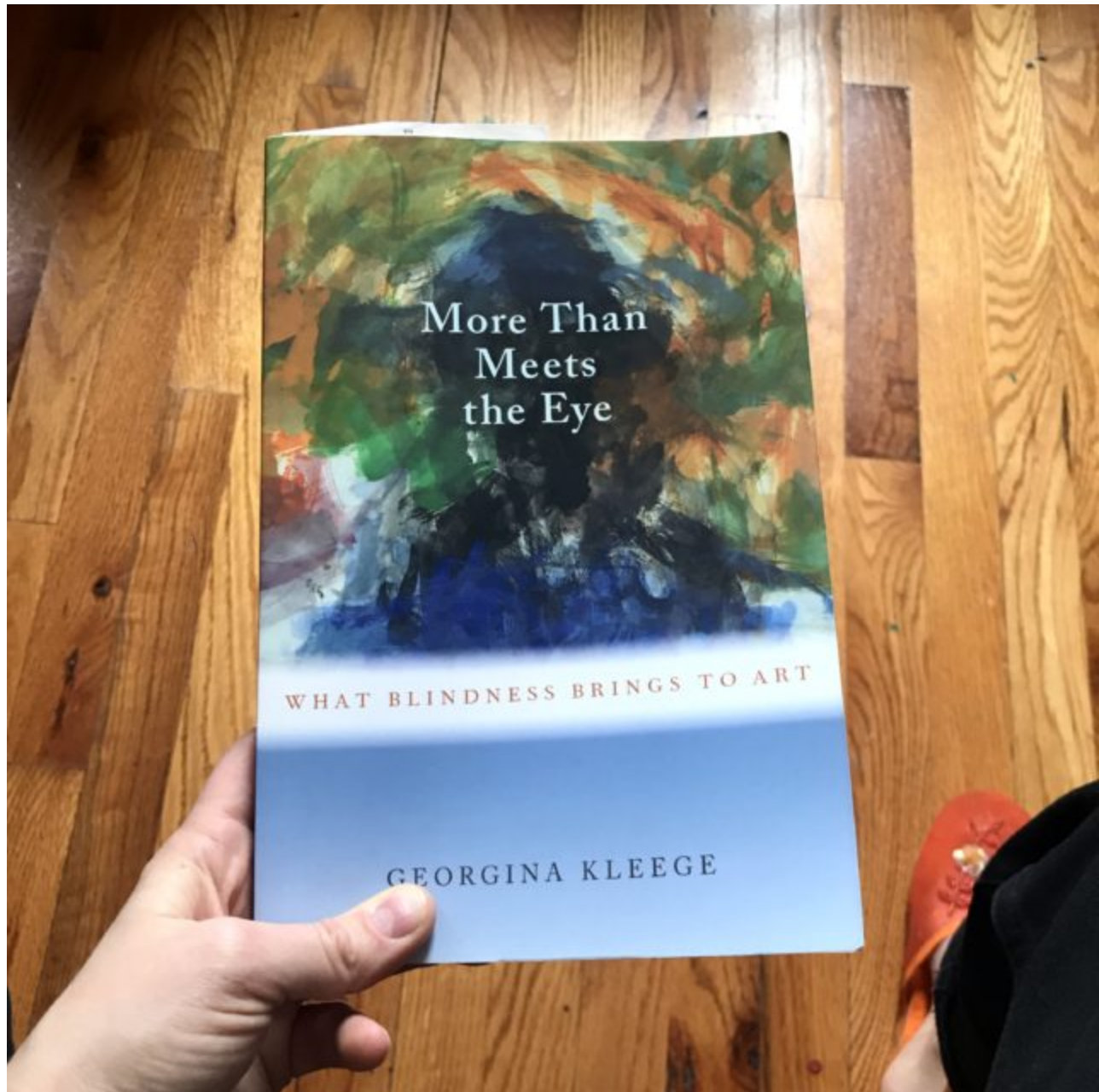


[Image description: Image from @museummammy described above.]

I'm also interest in how the tone of the description may shift depending on the tone of the image. Since this is a funny post, Madison Zalopany brings that humor into the description, "a screen shot of me being very impressed by my nephew Harry's new hat. The hat is a plastic green roof taken from a doll's house."



[Image description: Image from @mzalopany described above.]



[Image description: The book in my hand. The cover features a painting by @sargymannarchive. It is described in the book: “Sargy Mann’s self-portrait is somewhat atypical of his characteristic style because at first glance it might appear to be an abstraction, a play of complementary colors with swirls of dark blue and violet in the center of the composition, and yellows, greens, and oranges in the surrounding areas. But most viewers readily recognize the shape of head and shoulders in the central area as a silhouette, as if he’s picturing himself in front of a bright landscape or window with the light source behind him.”]

I highly recommend *More Than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art* by Georgina Kleege to anyone who is interested in thinking more about describing images. A favorite passage of mine from the chapter “What They Talk About When They Talk About Art”: “... Abandon the pretext of objectivity. It is impossible and besides the point. The blind listener knows that there’s some interpretation involved in even the most basic description, and often the systemic cataloguing of depicted objects is more information than anyone wants. Once

the pretense of objectivity is abandoned, it could be replaced by descriptions of the artist's techniques, as well as the effect the work has on the viewer, recognizing that this will differ from individual to individual."

Some of my favorite describers on Instagram are [Justin Allen](#), [Candystore](#), and [Jesse Darling](#). I also like reading the descriptions on the [Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago's website](#). The [process](#) and [guidelines](#) they use are a helpful reference, especially for organizations and institutions that are engaged in creating descriptions.

As part of *Alt-Text as Poetry*, Bojana and I have developed a workshop curriculum and are in the process of making a workbook. If you want to know more about Alt-Text as Poetry or my work in general, my website is shannonfinnegan.com and I'm on Twitter and Instagram [@shanfinnegan](#).