

[ARGOS presents]

[Activating Captions]

[How To Caption Better #1]

[Curators Christine Sun Kim and Niels Van Tomme address their curatorial collaboration, which started with the 2019 group exhibition Disarming Language at Tallinn Art Hall and evolved into Activating Captions, currently on view at ARGOS.]

*Christine : Hi everyone, my name is Christine Sun Kim, I go by CK, and I am a co-curator of the show with Niels.*

*Niels : Hi, My name is Niels Van Tomme, I am the director at Argos and co-curator with Christine Sun Kim of this exhibition.*

[A love for captions]

*Niels : When I started working at De Appel in Amsterdam in 2016, I was putting together the artistic program of my first year at De Appel, and contacted Christine to see if she would be interested in working on an exhibition project at De Appel. I'm super happy that she said yes, because it felt like an honor to work with her. I remember very well, one of the first nights that we went out together, that Christine asked me: do you like captions? And I was like: that's a strange question. And I was like: yeah, actually I do like captions, I feel like they're intimately entangled.*

*Christine: I don't remember asking you that question.*

*Niels : Yes, I do remember it well (chuckles). So for me it was a very revealing moment because I feel like the seeds of our current project, Activating Captions, originated from there. I feel like the love or fondness that we share about captioning and subtitling culture, although we came from very different backgrounds to it, already originated there. But maybe I'll let Christine tell her version of our origin story (laughs).*

*Christine : And then I remember you and I doing the show that we did in Tallinn at the Tallinn Art Hall in Estonia, and I remember when you asked me to do that one, I was unsure then too, seeing as I had never curated before, and from that experience I just learned so much and enjoyed that process, and I know that when you and I decided that we wanted to do this a little bit more, a little bit further, that's where we found Activating Captions.*

*And then of course COVID hit, and we did not really expect that, and I think that's a big reason why we chose to do this exhibition online, but that's great because captions belong on the screen, and so it's just great timing in that sense.*

*Niels : I remember very well our first conversation about it (= our curatorial collaboration). Where I was kind of like asking you, and after a while you were like: "why are you asking me about an exhibition about disability?" And I felt like a productive tension arising from that question, because it's true, why should I be asking you about an exhibition that I'm about to organize, but that already in the back of my head when we were talking, I was thinking: actually this would be amazing if I could curate this project together with Christine because I felt like, yeah, on the one hand I think two things were playing into my head: I felt like it was such new territory for me to think about that I also thought like I should unlearn the way I usually make exhibitions, but I was also thinking, I also need somebody who really talks or thinks about disability from first-hand experience, and not in a kind of abstract theoretical way.*

*Christine : I do wanna mention that this has also become kind of personal for me, for a long time I never considered myself as a person with disabilities, I have pride in my deaf culture and my deaf identity and disability has always felt like a label that was slapped on top of that, but that's kind of an old way of thinking. Now I am happy to be an active member of the disability community and that's been a shift in my thought process. In the past few years, I've said yes, I am a person with disability, and that's actually been a long journey for me, actually the exhibition that we did in Tallinn was part of that journey for me, and I remember when we were trying to figure out the exhibition format, and try to figure out what it would look like, I remember thinking that maybe there wouldn't be enough material or enough criticism, or a healthy framework of artists with disabilities, and I realized that we were gonna have to work from scratch, and so what's nice about this exhibition that we did in Tallinn and with Activating Captions that we're doing now, I'm hoping that both exhibitions can become part of the disability arts discourse, and I know that we've developed some basic foundation here, when we ask ourselves the questions of what does accessibility mean, how many languages do we want to include and things like that, and when we got to Activating Captions because we'd already gone through that journey for Disarming Language, I felt like the process had become a little bit easier, but I also think that these are formats that need to be considered from the beginning and not just for our work as curators, but for all curators, I think it's important that these are the things you ask yourself in the beginning, because it will save you more money at the end, right? Because by the end you can only offer either expensive accessibility, or half-assed accessibility where you don't have all the information.*

[Captions vs. subtitles]

*Christine : So maybe I can start by explaining the difference between captions and subtitles. So I think the more common word is subtitles, and oftentimes, subtitles is just translating language to language, conversation to conversation, they're not adding any more information than the spoken dialogue, but captions*

*or closed caption as well, include other information, so sometimes you can see that the captions will sometimes fix the alignment on the screen or adjust the alignment on the screen and align left or align right to indicate who's speaking, they'll also include audio cues in parentheses, like: phone ringing, music in the background. And so that helps the viewer have more of an interpretation of what they're watching, and I've seen that by now these words have become quite interchangeable, and in the past they were two very separate terms, and I'm okay with the fact that they're interchangeable at this point, but I'm trying to think what year it was. In 1972, what we saw in the US is that Julia Child had her first show on TV, she's a French chef, and I think it was an eight-episode arc, and she had put open captions on her program, and they were burned in, and so viewers couldn't opt-in or opt-out of those captions and for that moment, it was historical to see captions be on a program show on TV but American audiences called in and complained a lot. And so it just shows that American audiences have pretty much always resisted captions, but that responds to the burned-in open captions prompted the creation of closed captions, and that gives the privilege to turn captions on and off, and my issue with that is why don't we just have open captions, why aren't captions just burned-in? For me closed captions mean that, because they can be turned off, they can be removed from people's sight, and that means out of sight, out of mind, then that means that in a way disability isn't really in their face enough, my understanding is that in the UK, based off of some recent research, 18% of the UK's population uses captions, but out of that 18% of the entire population, only 20% are deaf or hard of hearing, so that means the other 80% are individuals who are either trying to learn the English language, or for any other reason, but it definitely attests to the fact that it's no longer a deaf thing any longer. And one of my things is that captions always have a connection, and rather a strong connection to accessibility. It is a way to provide information, and to me, what you're seeing in video art, is that there's a rise of the use of captions but it typically seems to be for aesthetic reasons, and so what I'm hoping to see is that accessibility and aesthetics can meet soon and become one and more common.*

[Firsthand experience]

*Niels : I mean, we had a very strict curatorial decision-making process that we would only work with artists who actually have experienced or experience disability from firsthand, so people who have in some way a disability, but then at the same time within the communication around Activating Captions, it's not put forward as such in a way that it was in Disarming Language. And I've been thinking about that in the past days, and maybe you should correct me if you think I'm wrong, but I think it was actually an interesting way to have it present, but not on the forefront, but somehow it becomes clear in every aspect of the project I think, if you look at the website and the kind of features that are there, if you look at the list of resources that we have compiled together with the artists and the writers of the project, it becomes super clear.*

[An audiovisual art]

*Niels : We were really looking for work that didn't just caption already existing audiovisual artworks, but work that really took captioning as the grounding principle of doing audiovisual work, and so that's how we came to this group of artists, who in my view are pioneers in this type of work.*

[Creating captions]

*Niels : I think the most important advice that I can give and that's really a starting point for everything that you want to do within that field, is work with people that experience these things firsthand, don't go into it like following some kind of a written thing that you try to follow, and try to do everything correctly, but really work with people, talk to them, there are no rules for doing this, so you also have a kind of agency to do things differently, and I think it's really something that you should work on and take responsibility for, and perhaps you can fail sometimes, but there's nothing wrong about learning from mistakes. We also discovered there isn't a fixed system in which we can transcribe every video and how we can provide each transcription, it's really something, we have to see case per case, make decisions, think about it, be actively involved with, become an actor within that process and work together with the artists on seeing what they think is important for their practice or for their work to be put forward, and yeah, so those are my two main ideas with which I think you should approach these kinds of possibilities.*

[Promise & practice]

*Niels : One of the most beautiful texts that I've written about, sorry read about, I haven't written it, but that I read about accessibility is the one by one of the artists in our exhibition, it's called "Accessibility in the Arts: A promise and a practice" by Carolyn Lazard, that really points out how accessibility cannot be thought of as something that you do, and that is then finished, and you can move on as an institution, it's a long-term commitment, it's a long-term process, it's a promise, it's a relationship that you build with people, for me it's really the becoming real of intersectionality in an institutional way and how it can be done, and that it's something that needs to be done as a conversation, as a relational practice, as something that is basically never finished and always growing.*

*Christine : I will say that accessibility is a huge spectrum, right? There's so many different disability groups, types of disabilities, physical, intellectual, so on and so forth, and so for Niels and I, we had to make some choices of what kind of accommodations that we want to provide for this exhibition, and as Niels said, it is a long-term promise.*

[An online platform]

*Christine : I feel like typically accessibility is looked at as one size fits all, and I get put in a box but this is why I like online stuff, because I can access whatever's on the screen, and depending on my mood I can engage in however way I please,*

*maybe I wanna read the transcript that day, or maybe I wanna access some of the audio descriptions that day, and I like that it is more than just captions, it's a bunch of things and our exhibition provides that, and I like being able to choose depending on my mood and that I have all these options provided to me and they're right in front of me, and so for me in that sense, the online format has been nice and something I've enjoyed.*

*Niels : But also I think an aspect that we haven't talked about I think also if you really want to grasp the full spectrum of captioning, of course not the full because there is way more, but what this exhibition tries to do and what we were trying to communicate, we cannot disentangle the magazine section from the project which is also featured online, and for which we've commissioned eight writers to produce a new text specifically for this occasion. And that also from very different angles and perspectives enriches the thinking and the possibilities of captioning but then in writing as something that you can read online, so I suggest experiencing the entire project, all of the accessibility features online, all of the texts, all of the resources, and then I think it's a good introduction to this exciting new world of captioning.*

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