Advancing Web Accessibility Standards in the Arts

Summary: Contemporary Art Library is requesting funding in the amount of $73,693 to plan and pilot new web accessibility features for art-centric digital libraries in three phases over the next two years.

Statement of National Need:

Visual art relies heavily on exhibition and performance documentation for scholarship and education, but users with disabilities are mostly excluded from these resources. While there have been efforts to make archives of such material more available to scholars through national finding aid networks such as the California Digital Library initiative currently in development, there has been little consideration given to how to make this material fully accessible to a general audience with a wide range of abilities and accessibility needs, and the unique set of challenges that visual art materials present in regard to accessibility.

Most online repositories of art documentation are what we could call Disability Access Level 0: completely inaccessible for most disabled users. Existing guides and initiatives, such as artist Carolyn Lazard's *Accessibility in the Arts: A Promise and a Practice,* are focused on achieving what we could call Level 1: basic usability for users with disabilities that provides a small amount of essential information. Institutions that achieve this level are considered laudable, even while disabled users are unable to have the kind of rich, deep experience that other users can. We are proposing to develop a concrete vision for a Level 2: interactive, responsive accessibility procedures that allow for deep engagement with documentation of art for users with disabilities. After speaking with artists, professors, librarians, curators and others from both the disabilities and contemporary art communities, we are not aware of any comparable projects currently in development.

For context, Contemporary Art Library is a new website that will launch publicly in January 2021, before our full grant application would be submitted. It is a centralized repository for digital archives of photo, video, and text-based documentation of international contemporary art exhibitions and performances. We've assembled a consortium of more than 50 partners, including institutions like the Hammer Museum at UCLA, the Wattis at California College of the Arts, and MIT's List Center. Their documentation histories will be included in the Library's database of approximately 300,000 images and growing.

Our project presents a unique opportunity to set and test national standards for web accessibility of visual art documentation on a large scale and in a way that's responsive to our audience's needs. These standards would be specific to an art context, yet easily transferable to other fields and disciplines. Our project also presents a unique set of challenges—how can we describe artwork in a meaningful way without reflecting our own biases? How can we do so in a way that's easily understood by a wide variety of readers? How do we implement these standards at a large scale? And how do we conceive of accessibility practices that are responsive to our audience's individual needs, rather than an average of the assumed needs of a diverse population?

Project Design: Our project would take place in three phases over the course of two years. In Phase 1: Research and Planning, we would set up individual meetings with 12 artists, library science specialists, digital archivists, and disabilities rights advocates to interview them about the needs of various users and the issues involved in developing new standards. We'd then organize two, day-long conferences with this group of experts to give presentations around a set of high-level questions related to their areas of expertise. In part because of Covid

and in part because of the various accessibility needs of our participants, we'd elect to do an all-digital conference. In Phase 2: Piloting, we'd generate a set of features and guidelines to produce accessibility content based on the Phase 1 conferences. We would design and implement features and generate content for a sample size of 1,000 projects. And we would hold another day-long conference for the Library team to present our findings and hear feedback. We would then revise our plans based on this feedback and publish our findings, both in narrative form and as guidelines and tools that other archives could use for their own efforts. For Phase 3: Implementing, we'd have a fully fleshed-out system in place that would allow us to implement accessibility features on a large scale. We are seeking funding from the IMLS NLG-L for Phases 1 and 2 of our project.

Diversity Plan: Because we are committed to diversity in all areas of our organization's work, we intend to make sure that our working group reflects the broad diversity of both the disability community and the art community. We have relationships with institutions from around the United States and around the world, including dozens of Founding Partners of the Library. We would use this strong network to recruit members of the working group to ensure that we are representing as many perspectives as possible as we develop these new standards.

National Impact: Providing a centralized repository with a standard and reliable format where people who are differently abled could go to access important art historical documentation will immediately transform the status quo: documentation of contemporary art is currently dispersed and fragmented, with small bodies of material siloed on websites with varying degrees of accessibility and systems of navigation.

Implementing these new best practices would also impact the many important institutions whose archives we'll be including, as many of them do not have the time or organizational capacity to make their content accessible on their own. Our descriptions, captions and other accessibility content will be available to those partners, who could then use them on their own websites in service of an even broader audience.

And finally, our project would broadly impact the field of digital archiving, as we'd be developing best practices and industry standards that could be applied across disciplines. We will share all of our findings, but more importantly, we will be an example that raises expectations for accessibility in our field and for online archives generally.

Budget Summary: The total amount requested is $73,636. In the planning phase of our project, this includes individual meetings with 12 specialists to help us focus our conference goals ($3,000 total); conference preparation and coordination ($5,120 for research and administration to plan the event and recruit our working group); honoraria of $500 per invitee totaling $6,000; event staffing ($3,200); and event costs (including $1,396 for sign language interpreters and other disability accommodations). In the piloting phase of our project, this amount includes $10,000 for our Web Developer and Executive Director to work with a designer specializing in accessibility; coding and other implementation on a sample size of 1,000 Library project records (including an estimated 20,000 images) (requiring $30,720 for our Web Developer working with our staff Librarian, Assistant Librarian, and Executive Director to accomplish); a second day-long conference with the original 12 participants to whom we'd present our findings and prototypes and solicit feedback (honoraria and event staffing amounting to $9,200); and final dissemination costs ($5,000 to produce a website and webinars that meet a high standard of accessibility).