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‘Access as an Ethic’: Giving Dance Myriad Points of Entry

For the arts ensemble Kinetic Light, the needs of disabled people are sources of inspiration and innovation.



From left, Laurel Lawson, Jerron Herman and Alice Sheppard, rehearsing Kinetic Light’s “Wired,” a dance work that can also be experienced through audio description. Credit...Nina Westervelt for The New York Times

By Margaret Fuhrer

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Two dancers are suspended high above the stage, shadowy light glinting off the hand rims of their wheelchairs. They hold long strands of barbed wire that stretch, weblike, across the proscenium. As a haunting a cappella score builds momentum, they descend, twisting slowly through the semidarkness, until their chairs come to rest on the floor.

At least that's how I, a non-disabled writer, experienced the first moments of Kinetic Light's "Wired." But as with everything this disability arts ensemble creates, there are myriad other ways to encounter the work.

Before the show, a tactile exhibition allows for exploration of the show's set, props and costumes. Some seating features haptic technology, enabling audience members to feel the vibrations of the soundtrack. Several forms of audio description can be played in a variety of combinations through the specialized app [Audimance](#), including detailed expository prose by the artist and filmmaker Cheryl Green and an original poetry cycle by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha.

Disabled bodies and perspectives define Kinetic Light's work. Its four core members — the choreographers and performers Alice Sheppard, Laurel Lawson and Jerron Herman, and the lighting, video and projection designer Michael Maag — are disabled. So are nearly all of their collaborators. Though everyone is welcome in the audience, the group's art is intended specifically for disabled people.

Image



Herman, Lawson and Sheppard, rehearsing. "We're thinking about access as an ethic, as an aesthetic, as a practice, as a promise, as a relationship with the audience," Sheppard said. Credit...Nina Westervelt for The New York Times

In addition to advancing a for-us-by-us approach, Kinetic Light is part of a broader movement, led by disabled artists, that positions the needs of disabled people as sources of inspiration and innovation. It's a philosophy of performance in which every element of a production, from the lighting to the audio description, is meant to reflect the artistic integrity of the whole, allowing all comers a rich experience of the work.

"We're thinking about access as an ethic, as an aesthetic, as a practice, as a promise, as a relationship with the audience," said Sheppard, the founder and artistic director of Kinetic Light. "And it's not just us. The disability arts community is really in a moment of vast experimentation."

"Wired," at the Shed Aug. 25-27, applies those principles to the story of barbed wire. After a transformative experience with Melvin Edwards's sculpture ["Pyramid Up and Down Pyramid"](#) (1969) at the Whitney Museum, Sheppard began researching the steel fencing's complex history. Barbed wire became the connecting thread in "Wired," a dance work that touches on race, immigration and disability. And the performers themselves are wired too — in aerial rigging: Sheppard, Lawson and Herman all take flight over the course of the piece, the group's first exploration of aerial dance.

Editors' Picks

Ahead of the New York debut of "Wired," the four members of Kinetic Light spoke over Zoom about what it means for a work of art to be accessible, and how that question guides their creative practices. Here are edited excerpts from the conversation.

How does barbed wire link the themes you explore in "Wired?"

ALICE SHEPPARD This piece is riddled with wire — literally, figuratively, metaphorically. You can't escape it.

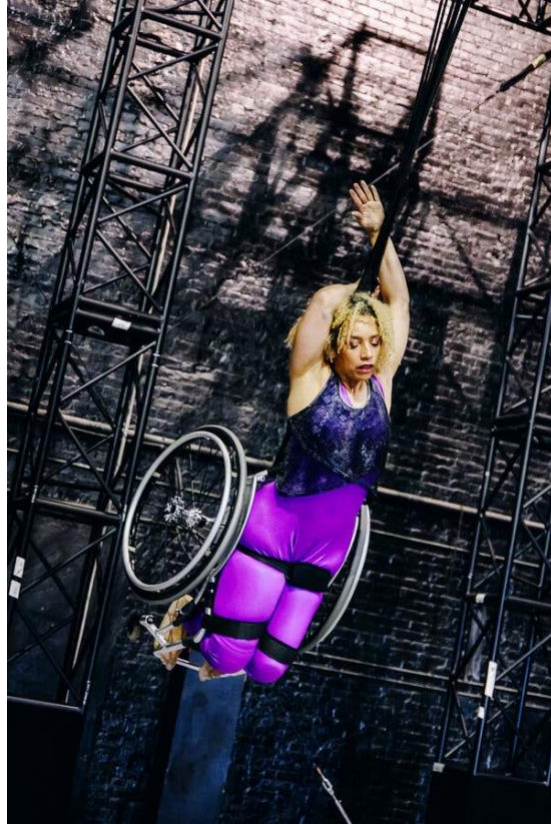
MICHAEL MAAG In the research process, we discovered that there are 2,000-plus patents on different types of barbed wire. It is ubiquitous, and it has formed the world in ways that are really amazing. It is used in agriculture, it is used in incarceration. It is used to keep people out and to keep people in.

JERRON HERMAN Barbed wire, as a technology, is one of those containers that can hold multiple stories.

How do you define access, and how does it shape your storytelling — in "Wired" and in general?

SHEPPARD Let's start with what most of the world generally means by access, which is, What do you have to do to make it possible for disabled people to participate, enter a space, enjoy a piece of art? It can sometimes be phrased as, "What do we need to do to be in compliance with the [Americans With Disabilities Act](#)?"

Image



“At every point, we’re thinking about how this will live in many different forms,” Sheppard said of “Wired.” Credit...Nina Westervelt for The New York Times

All of that is about what has to be done retroactively, for a work of art that is already created, so that disabled people can experience it. Most people in the dance field are just beginning to come to those questions. But disabled artists have already taken on their inequities and injustices.

LAUREL LAWSON We’re approaching this from a really different place. Access is not a separate thing; access is *the* thing. So the art itself is accessible in a way that does not prioritize one way of being, one way of experiencing, one way of entering into the art.

HERMAN It’s embedded in the aesthetics of the work — just like you would identify a genre of dance.

MAAG When I’m thinking about the visuals, for example, I’m also thinking how they will be described. What is the poetry in the words that relates to the visual that I am presenting so that it all flows together? And all of this, of course, is in response to the beautiful embodiment of these dancers onstage.

So access factors into the act of creation, too?

SHEPPARD At every point, we’re thinking about how this will live in many different forms. How can the verbal form be an artistic whole in itself, and the sound form, and

the lights and projections, and the poetry? Each form is an expression of the fullness of the work.

LAWSON And to complicate that a little bit further, access is never one size fits all. We have all of these pieces, and people may be putting different elements together. So you have to take the utmost care with each one.

How does that inform your approach to audio description?

LAWSON We designed Audimance as an interactive application. It's not like live description — “here's the content, and you can listen to it or not, but that's your only choice.” You have as much choice in and as much control over your experience as anyone else in the audience.



“Access is not a separate thing; access is the thing,” Lawson said. Credit...Nina Westervelt for The New York Times

SHEPPARD One of the questions that arises is, What audio content is appropriate, or best expresses the work? At one level, you have to be able to know what is going on. You have to be able to understand — if you wish — that there's turning, there's flying, there's landing, there's embracing, what the costumes look like, what the set looks like. But that is not enough. A description of something, no matter how beautiful, is a displaced encounter.

After that, things get more complicated, because then the question is one of interpretation. Do you say, “She raised her arm”? Do you say, “She raised her arm slowly,” or “She jabbed her arm forcefully into the air”?

What Audimance enables us to do is to give several different kinds of movement description, so we are able to actually communicate, in poetic and dramatic ways, not just what is happening, but the inner and emotional core of what is happening.

Michael, how do you design lighting from that perspective?

MAAG Lighting is about control of what you see: where the shadows fall, where the light is. I default to enhancing the experience of the disabled performer. The straps, the glint on the wheels, all of that is beautiful to me. I want you to see how the shadows fall on a body that has been strapped into a harness to keep it upright in a chair.



Michael Maag, at home in Ashland, Ore., said of barbed wire, a focus of “Wired”: “It is used to keep people out and to keep people in.” Credit...Chris Pietsch for The New York Times

A really big side of this is exploring how to design lighting and projections in a way that is equitable for a neurodiverse audience. Much of this is very well-known stuff, like, you don’t strobe the lights at a certain frequency because people who are light-sensitive will get a migraine or an epileptic seizure. But then it’s about creating art that doesn’t rely on any of the things that are problematic.

SHEPPARD So often access is explained as a series of “don’ts.” Michael’s work here is pushing us into a space of, when you know what the “don’ts” are, how do you get beyond that, and how does that then become the art?

Is dance an especially interesting medium for this kind of exploration, since it involves so many forms of sensory perception?

LAWSON We sometimes say Kinetic Light is not a dance company. Because, yes, dance is going on, but as important as the embodied dance is the lighting, is the design — is the heard, the read, the seen, the felt work that not everyone in the room is experiencing, because no one person *can* experience everything.

SHEPPARD And with that multiplicity, what we have done is decoupled access from impairment. We’re not saying: “This is for blind people. This is for deaf people.” Because that medically defines the need for access as a deficit.

HERMAN One of the beautiful parts of this research and development is dissolving siloed experiences in disability culture. We’re saying that there’s no need to embody a certain impairment or have a certain disability narrative in order to “access access.” Experiments that are happening in this company can then move forward in someone else’s work, and we are also being informed and influenced by others.



Herman, here rehearsing “Wired,” said access is “embedded in the aesthetics of the work — just like you would identify a genre of dance.” Credit...Nina Westervelt for The New York Times

Have you seen a change in the wider dance world’s approach to access?

SHEPPARD There has been a shift away from access as being a phenomenon of the built environment. Prepandemic, you'd say "access" and people would say, "Oh yeah, we've got a ramp, we're good!" Which, eh, right, you can get into the building, but is the work accessible once you're in the building? So there's been a new layer of attention being paid to the art itself. That's a good and necessary change. But the conversation has shifted faster than field awareness.

What about presenters or theaters that say, "We can't afford to do this"?

SHEPPARD That is a complicated question. If you have not made your show accessible, and you show up at a venue and say, "OK, to make this show work we need two ASL interpreters and three audio describers," et cetera — well, that's a late point to be looking for access funding. So I think what we should be looking at is a funding strategy that enables creators to bring access into the work from the very beginning, to have it be a budgeted line item in all grant applications, in all venue budgets, in presenter budgets. The point that it is registering as costing money is the point at which it's not planned for.

What's the next access frontier?

LAWSON One major area of research and exploration is haptic interfaces [interactive devices that simulate touch]. We are about to dive into how we can use multiple sensations of touch to produce the feeling of moving — perhaps even actual movement itself, where we're not just manipulating the skin, the muscles, the joints, but even the brain. In some ways it's kind of a weird place to sit, this line between art and engineering. It gets seriously geeky really fast. But how fascinating!

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/17/arts/dance/kinetic-light-disability-arts-access.html>