

# The Distribution of the Sensible

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## *Introduction*

This article analyzes two media artworks through the recent disability media studies perspective (Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick 2017) that brings together the academic fields of disability studies (Shakespeare 2006; Williamson 2015) and critical media studies (Ott and Mack 2010). This research further aims to understand how disability shapes and has been shaped by media texts, technologies, and creative industries in contemporary society as well as “how the incorporation of disability into emerging types and institutions of popular media is not only important in terms of representation, but also in terms of how it directs our attention to media technologies, access, and complex relations between media producers and audiences” (Ellcessor 2017, 32–33).

In particular, disability media studies scholar Elizabeth Ellcessor puts the range of meanings of access into dialogue through the notion of “cultural accessibility,” a term that captures the interrelationships among technological and economic access, access to representation, production, and the public sphere. The notion of “cultural accessibility” is similar to what the philosopher Jacques Rancière calls “distribution of the sensible,” a concept that reveals who can have a share in a community and defines who can be visible or not in the cultural production. In his own words:

I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. (Rancière 2004, 12.)

These perspectives create a useful theoretical framework to read the media artworks *Reperto AntropoLogico UNO NOVE NOVE SETTE* (1997), an installation by Giacomo Verde, and *Cordata* (2020), a sound performance by Chiara Bersani. First and foremost, these perspectives offer a lens to analyze the role of media in struggles over social, political, and economic

power. The two works were conceived in two different historical periods. Verde's installation was created at the end of the 1990s, when the internet was thought to be central to social growth. Bersani's *Cordata* was born in 2020, soon after the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a time when the internet became the only public space inhabited by people with disabilities.

*Reperto AntropoLogico UNO NOVE NOVE SETTE*

Giacomo Verde was one of the first Italian artists to create interactive and Web art works. His pieces are characterized by the employment of low technologies, a choice motivated both by political stances and the will to share his creative practices and make them accessible to everyone. *Reperto AntropoLogico UNO NOVE NOVE SETTE* (1997) exhibits a wheelchair equipped with a laptop and a stand for intravenous medicine. The laptop screen reads: "I'll be right back." If someone sits on the chair, it starts to spin, and the laptop connects to the network. This installation can be read through several conceptual levels. First of all, it is a computer-house connected to the Web and to the veins, meaning that technologies and bodies are strictly connected to each other in Verde's vision. All of Verde's works are affected by a performative dimension that calls for inescapable attention to the moment of execution and employs the body as matter that is shaped and may shape the technological medium in use. The virtual space for Verde is not something other than, next to, or beyond the real. On the contrary, the real merges with the imaginary, and in this way, there is no distinction between the two dimensions. There is a blurring between the real and virtual space, a contamination of each other, a complex mixture that shapes us and is shaped by our visions. Verde wrote:

Quello che secondo me confina le opere di Stelarc e di Orlan in una vecchia cartografia del corpo e dell'esistente è il loro insistere sulla separazione gerarchica tra mente/progetto/tecnologia da una parte e carne/uomo/natura dall'altra. Ancora si sente l'influenza di un soggetto che vuole controllare e modificare se stesso e l'ambiente circostante per ricalcare un'immagine predeterminata, piuttosto che sentire complessivamente l'esistente sentendosene oggetto integrante. Il loro agire appartiene ancora alla dominante società dello spettacolo, dell'immagine, che i loro corpi-nodo riescono a sfruttare più o meno sapientemente per la propria sopravvivenza senza metterla veramente in crisi.<sup>1</sup> (Verde 2007, 127).

<sup>1</sup> I think that what confines the works of Stelarc and of Orlan within an old cartography

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Continuing with the analysis of the installation, we can see how the artist invites the viewer to act. The chair starts its movement when a person sits on it, so that the artwork becomes the world of the “inhabitant,” including the relationships with the Web and the other users. It is important to recall that in 1997, the internet represented the utopia of democracy par excellence. The person who accesses the installation’s Web site, even those who log in from their homes, can leave messages or their names, establishing network links between the artwork, the Web pages, their own computer, and Verde’s and others’ Web sites. Thus, the installation declares the duty of artists and institutions to provide contexts rather than works to generate knowledge and participation. In this way, the work becomes a system of collective relations, a co-evolving flux that originates from the concrete actions of individuals and their input. Moreover, the rooms of the museum where the installation is placed are dwelled in daily, giving rise to a continuous relationship between world and person, between outside and inside, through which the computer becomes the door for accessing the world and making a network of relationships that become works of art.

### *The Restoration*

*Reperto AntropoLogico UNO NOVE NOVE SETTE* was exhibited only once at the *Segnali d’opera* exhibition in 1997 at the Gallarate Museum in Lombardy, and it was restored on the occasion of the recent exhibition *Liberare Arte da Artisti* at the Camec in La Spezia in Liguria. On this occasion, young artist Lorenzo Antei, together with the exhibition’s curators, decided to restore the installation, taking into account directions by Verde, who technically describes his installation as a wheelchair surrounded by mats and equipped with a multimedia laptop connected to the internet; optical sensors; an electric motor fixed under the chair that is activated by optical sensors; a drip stand with an intravenous drip; and personal objects.

The optical sensors came from a mechanism for automatically opening

of the body and of what exists is their insistence on hierarchical separation between mind/project/technology, on one side, and flesh/humans/nature, on the other. One still senses the influence of a subject who wants to monitor and modify itself and the surrounding environment to retrace a predetermined image, rather than thoroughly sensing how what exists comes to sense itself as an object that is integral. Their actions still belong to the dominant society of spectacle, of the image, which their node-bodies succeed in exploiting, more or less knowingly, for their own survival without truly putting survival in crisis. [Translation by the editors.]

gates. These photocells on the chair sense the presence or absence of the user and, connected to a remote control, communicate with the control unit, allowing the rotation of the chair. Antei made an experiment of migrating the old technologies into a new machine, taking into account how to recycle the photocells and the motor, even if these cannot communicate with each other because of the absence of the control unit. To control interactivity, Antei then designed a system using an openFrameworks program that could talk to an Arduino Microcontroller to send commands to the motors. The goal was to strengthen the relationship between the characteristics of the old technologies and how they would be used by recent audiences in reconstructing works that are partly lost or obsolete. According to Annamaria Monteverdi: “Antei has looked to the technological artifacts from an ecological angle to revisit the artwork’s identity of an analogue or digital format; it’s a creative reuse of it from a sustainability point of view” (Monteverdi 2022, 163).

In digital arts, works are subject to obsolescence because of technological innovation, meaning that their restoration requires specific knowledge for creating systems to reproduce the characteristics, the timing, and the behavior of the original hardware – in other words, a creative mind that can respect the philosophy with which the work was created. Antei, respecting Verde’s ethics, involves an open-access technology, Arduino, which is the result of collective thought and actions. He worked to design and reconstruct new hardware and software, which were an integral part of the artwork itself. At the end of the exhibition, the tech reader of this work was donated to the Gallarate Museum for the future activation of the installation.

This restoration gives us the opportunity to see the installation again and from another perspective. Given the presence of the wheelchair, the author of the phrase, “I’ll be right back,” could not move on his own legs. Then, how and where is this person-body? Something or someone is missing. The installation can be read as an announcement of an absence, also implied in the work title “anthropological finding,” which refers to a trace of human existence left to posterity. Who or what is missing, then? In 1997, what was probably missing was a complex vision of technology, which in Verde’s mind was a dynamic relationship between bodies, spaces, techniques, and cultures. If one of these elements is missing, then technology is disabled. This is deduced from the history of this installation, which was preserved for years as a sculpture rather than an interactive work. If we read the work literally, what is also missing is a subject who is unable to move, a disabled person. Then, returning to Rancière, we should wonder:

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Who can take part or not in the cultural system? For whom do we conceive spaces, exhibitions, and works? Is it possible to think about technologies in order to enable a wider enjoyment of the works by people with disabilities, who are often missing from museum audiences?

### *Cordata*

*Cordata* (Roped Climbing Party) by Chiara Bersani was conceived in 2020, when soon after the lockdown, a legal decree granted the restart of theatrical activities. At that moment, though, not all artists were able to go back to work. Bersani, a disabled artist, was indeed one of those “fragile subjects” recommended to stay at home to take care of her own health. When listening to *Cordata*, the audience receives a postcard from Pontenure, a little village in northern Italy where Bersani currently lives, which allows the audio to be downloaded by scanning a QR code. The soundscape, conceived by Bersani and designed by F. De Isabella, is a sound performance to be listened to with headphones when immersed in nature. *Cordata* is an attempt to imagine a landscape collectively and an experience designed for private enjoyment. Just like the roped climbing party (cordata) that is a group of persons who are linked together by a safety rope in climbing a mountain, the sound performance can only exist thanks to the union of bodies different in form, rhythm, identity, place, and perception. In this context, the safety rope is the artist’s voice, the poetic glue for a collective action. At the same time, Bersani’s voice testifies to her impossibility of being there, and it also reveals an absence because the postcard immediately declares a geographical distance between the speaker and the listener. *Cordata* implicitly highlights the level of accessibility of our cultural system in the post-pandemic context, which is what the scholar Elizabeth Ellcessor defines as “cultural accessibility” when referring to the active participation of people with disabilities in cultural making (Ellcessor 2017, 42).

A single meaning of the word “accessibility” does not exist. Rather, it has a plurality of definitions according to the theoretical framework in which it is used. Each situation moves and reformulates its significance and, at the same time, the potential outcomes for a hypothetical community to benefit. In general terms, accessibility is the characteristic of a device, a service, a resource or an environment to be easily usable by any kind of person with no discrimination (Shawn-Lawton, Abou-Zahra, and Brewer 2014). In legal terms, accessibility to culture is a right regulated by Italian law 104

of 1992 and backed by article 30 of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

In the context of disability studies, a field of interdisciplinary studies that emerged at the end of the 1970s, the accessibility of a service, a product, or an environment is defined by the degree to which a person with disability is able to act socially and politically (Shakespeare 2006, 197–204; Williamson 2015, 14–17). Disability studies, although articulated and heterogeneous within themselves, are carried together by scholars with disability, whose aim is to shed light on the disadvantages of disabled people in obtaining social and cultural access and to problematize the present medical model. The latter approaches disability as an individual and biological problem to be treated. On the contrary, disability studies propose a heterogeneous range of models, including the social model (Oliver 1983) that aims to go beyond the idea of disability as an individual problem and instead pays attention to the level of accessibility in the social environment.

In the same field of studies, the scholar Bess Williamson (2015, 14–17) distinguishes between a technical interpretation and a figurative one of the term *accessibility*. In the first case, it refers to adopted solutions to enter and move in urban spaces, architectural constructions, or Web sites. Figuratively, the term suggests a much wider group of meanings which lead to the capability of a particular society to guarantee equal opportunities for political participation. From the perspective of disability media studies, the area this paper refers to, when considering access to media – and its cultural and political benefits – it is crucial to move beyond representation to consider accessibility as well as access to production. According to Ellcessor,

Cultural accessibility entails reimagining disability and the norms of media production and representation; coalitional, collaborative, and participatory forms of production, reception, and interaction are key to creating culturally accessible media [...] Beyond the simple creation of media texts, access to production should also be inclusive of access to modes of promotion, distribution, and exhibition. That is to say, people must be able to share the media they produce. Historically, this has been difficult, given the high barriers to entry to commercial media industries. For people with disabilities, a lack of accessible tools, discrimination, and passive neglect are possible causes for a pervasive underrepresentation in all capacities related to media production. [...] In contrast, online media has offered new opportunities for the creation of media outside of traditional institutions and without historical barriers to financing, production tools, or distribution. For people with disabilities, this has meant

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increased access to a range of media texts, tools, and communities. (Ellcessor 2017, 42–45.)

Access to production for artists with disabilities also means access to narrate and to produce multiple, different representations of disability and to contest stereotypes. With *Cordata*, Bersani works with sound and online media to give voice to the segregation of people with disabilities in the pandemic era. At the same time, she appropriates the available means of production to create at a distance an affective relationship with the audience.

### *Conclusion*

For people with disabilities, the struggle for equality of access to the arts and culture is part of a wider struggle to access the physical and intangible resources of daily life. In *Time to Act* (2021), a research report authored by On the Move and commissioned by the British Council in the context of Europe Beyond Access to look into the knowledge gaps in the cultural sector related to accessibility, it is evident how low the participation of disabled artists and audiences is among European arts organizations. Giacomo Verde and Chiara Bersani focus on this lack and on “cultural accessibility” for people with disabilities, in which media are not only technically accessible to the disabled user, but relevant to their participation in the creation and sharing of culture in the public sphere.

In the case of *Reperto AntropoLogico UNO NOVE NOVE SETTE*, Verde makes clear the absence of a disabled subject in the public space of the museum by leaving a wheelchair vacant. Twenty-three years later, Bersani symbolically occupies that empty chair through a sound performance that, once again, testifies to the inaccessibility of our cultural system for people with disabilities. Both installations ask us: Can digital technologies engage different political subjectivities, fostering accessibility to cultural spaces, where the term “accessibility” is a political issue, esthetic practice, and perception of creative writing, rather than a service added as an after-thought? What can we do – as artists, scholars, cultural organizations – so that cultural spaces do not lack something or someone?

These artworks underline the necessity to consider accessible practices not only as instruments “addressed to” a particular community, but also as an opportunity to experiment with multisensory and transmedia works that widen and redefine the relationship between bodies, esthetics,

audiences, media production, and political instances. A responsible choice will make it possible for a subject/a person to say: "I'll be right back."

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