

Jenni House Artist Talk - Katie Lone Craney
Shortened and edited transcript with no time stamps

I want to start off with these two photos. As I've been thinking about this presentation, it really is a story anytime we share; we're telling a story, and these two books, in particular the epigraph on the left, and a note on the right have helped form my thoughts and practice.

The image on the left is from Billy-Ray Belcourt's book, *NDN Coping Mechanisms*, with the quotes, "I wasn't trying to make a sentence. I was trying to break free," from Ocean Vuong, and the second quote from Anne Carson, "words bounce."

On the right, a book of poems by Ilya Kaminsky; I wanted to point out his note on silence, "the deaf don't believe in silence, silence is an invention of the hearing," and on the top note, he speaks about how sign can become a new language, and potentially even a safer language.

My work is a collection of entanglements and conversations with stories, poems papers and lived experiences from many people, including those doing some incredible work for equitable livable futures. Many of the thoughts I share today are reflection on an extinct, and an extension of these brilliant thinkers, writers, advocates, organizers, educators, artists, and shape shifters. I also have a Google Doc with a list of a bunch of great resources and books that I've put it in the chat, but I'll make sure to share it again.

I work primarily with found and discarded human made and naturally made objects. I layer these items with photographs on to two-dimensional scrap metal with wax to fix everything on to the metal pieces are often in a grid format, and the metal plates are hand cut to about the size of a playing card. This is the first piece I made using this format and technique for 15 metal plates with various ice themed imagery, as well as some blueberry died glass, mixed with reflective metal and silver leaf. This piece is titled, "You Are a Tender History of Ice."

Much of my work is an attempt to communicate the complicated layers of our changing lands and climate, like an emotional tool to cope with grief of experiencing how quickly the North is changing, and as a mechanism to find more connection in the turbulence. The piece is titled "Unconventional solutions," from a line by writer Caroline Van Hemert, from her book, *The Sun is a Compass*, quote, "unconventional solutions may just be what we need in these unconventional times."

This piece has photographs gauze tissue paper fish leather, found qiviut, which is the muskox wool, and a cotton grass seed. I gathered the kid you on a mountain side just outside of Sitnasuaq, or Nome, in northwest Alaska, where wool often becomes embedded in the tundra, and on low shrubs that musk ox traveled through my hand here is next to a clump of the prized underworld that is known as the finest world in the world.

Some of the agency of using scrap materials I gained from being a very poor art student. I scavenged from the recycling bin and the printmaking lab or the paper recycling bin in order to make my work, which was often on the backs of others thrown away art, including etching plates and other scrap materials. I've continued working with scrap to push against consumer culture and the status quo, and instead think about the relationship of the materials in any given setting.

I currently gather scrap metal from various sources such as the side of the road, the recycling center, and our own building projects. The video here is a snippet of what a final piece looks like. This is the sequence of working with an aluminum washing machine panel. I use tin snips to cut the metal and depending on the type I can cut up to about 20-22 gauge metal with just hand snips. This finished work is a photograph dyed with blueberry juice and attached to the metal with a thin layer of the wax.

I tend to work quite small, and my process is usually a lot of laying things out and asking how items in my work communicate with each other and what is the conversation I want to have through the piece. I'm interested in the tension between human made and naturally made materials, and how this tension parallels body-land relations. I use my art to share that there are many ways of knowing, existing, and thriving in this world, and I often try to ask through my work, "how are you experiencing the world?" The 'you' and this question varies. Sometimes it's the art itself. Sometimes it's the objects or the context of their surroundings. Sometimes it's asking the viewers, or my neighbors or the community at large.

The piece on the right has a cottongrass seed, and its full seed head mounted under plastic, and they're pinned under metal with small nails. There's a piece with bullet shell casings that I picked up off the side of the road. The piece was made in response to wildfire caused by a gender reveal party in California, and the complicated history of language and wildfire suppressants. The orange color, and the imagery is haunting and resembles the color of many fire retardants therefore I decided to call the piece "Fire retardant."

The piece on the right is made with small used matchbook boxes, titled "language of permafrost," which is also written in Braille on the third piece. The cottongrass seed head and stock represent its traditional use as a fire starter.

Lately I've been experimenting with materials besides metal, including other found objects that offer symbols or metaphors to the themes that I'm working with. Cottongrass is found in a lot of my work, and for many reasons. I'm interested in it aesthetically, culturally, metaphorically, and quite literally for its wind-blown seed dispersal. I'm also interested in its ability to thrive throughout the melting north and be used as a wick to keep warm.

This piece is two cassette tape cases with cottongrass seed heads in the case on the left, and a black and white photo transparency of cotton grass blowing in the wind on the right.

I have an ongoing series of works I call "Seed Songs," and this piece embodies the whole series with the simple use of the cassette tape. This focus on seeds comes from needing something tangible to hold while trying to function in our increasingly fragmented and fractured world.

For the last couple of years, I have been learning to write short passages in Braille. Both English Grade 1 and 2. Grade 1 is a letter for letter transcription grade two is contracted making the Braille more compact and quicker to read. To write with a slate and stylus, one punches paper with a stylus into the cells of the slate. The writing is actually backwards, you're going from right to left, and it's also writing in a mirror of how the words eventually materialize on the front of the paper. I use a program online called Braille translator to help create these mirrored phrases.

This video shows the process of writing onto a playing card. This piece will eventually become part of a larger piece with a full deck of cards, with the writing “I am alive” in English Grade 1.

The cards are thicker material, so it takes a little more deliberate stylus work to make sure that the Braille comes through evenly.

The piece on the right has the Braille phrase, “every spot we're standing on was once in a different place” is on newsprint and layered with a transparent and blurred photograph of the Chilkat River Valley, just outside of Haines.

I became interested in writing in Braille for a few reasons, including learning about my great-grandmother's blindness and wondering about the decisions that she had to make in her life. I've been making this work also to communicate with her and connect with future relatives. This is the first piece I made with her in mind. I think of it as an as a communication attempt between the two small plates, one with the cottongrass seed head, the full head is mirrored on the reflective metal. The page written in Braille is a language I haven't been able to translate. There are small silver dots painted on the Braille paper, and I think of them as mimicking the seeds, blowing in the wind. They're also quietly reflecting the viewer into the piece. The seeds symbolize a long history of evolution, adaptability, and survival, while also maintaining a promise for the future.

On the right is a photograph of Mary Etta, my great-grandmother. She was about age 10 or 12. This photo was taken when she was at the Gary School for the Blind. We don't know very much about her early days, what school was like, how she was treated, what she dreamed. As I've been making work with Braille, I think about the books she used to read and wonder *what were they?* What stories were available to her? What were her favorites? And what were *her* stories? What was she passionate about? Did she feel supported? Loved? Taken care of? I have so many questions that will only remain questions.

When thinking about this use of Braille, I'm a sighted maker, I do wear glasses, and it's important for me to think about the aspects of cultural appropriation of Braille by sighted creators. There are those who use Braille as a puzzle for sighted people to solve, as a means for repurposing Braille with no interest in blind people's experience. I've included a few sources in that list that I'll make sure to share. One book, is by Georgina Kleege, and she wrote a chapter called “Visible Braille, Invisible Blindness,” in her book, *More Than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art*.

These are important critiques to bring up as there is long standing, tiring metaphors and tropes associated with blindness. For example, a story or reference of a hypothetical blind man or seer, or saying one is blind as a reference to not knowing what is really going on in the world.

These are problematic uses of language, as the physical reality for many blind people is that they are very aware and active participants in the world that wasn't built for them. It's important to learn about stereotypical projected experiences by understanding the lived experiences of Blind artists, writers and creators. I'm sharing this to hold myself accountable to these conflicts, and I'm always open to critique to better understand and be informed on the impact of my intentions as a creator.

I also want to share that, if you're interested in learning ways to expand access and the work that you do, I highly recommend checking out the Access is Love *Places to Start* list that's also on the list I'll share. With these conversations in mind and wanting to challenge my own visual visual-centric art

practice, I've been beginning to rethink how and why I make, and I'm attempting to make newer work that offers more of a multimodal sensory experience.

Another aspect of including Braille in my work is to address the need for access when discussing planning and adapting to the climate crisis. Climate change disproportionately affects disabled communities in many ways. It's critical that disabled communities have access to. But more importantly, are a part of creating the information communication and planning for the uncertain futures that I had. This video shows my hands paging through a three-ringed book with different passages and quotes written in Braille. Many quotes are related to or direct responses from scientists, journalists, and poets about our shifting world. Some of the photographs are printed in black and white, while others have images in an orange, pink color. These pages are layered under the Braille with imagery of high mountain glaciers, maps, and graphs of Arctic Ocean and sea ice extent.

The same systems contributing to climate change are also contributing to creating disability. The same economic systems that exploit and undervalue interconnected Earth systems also exploit and undervalue people with disabilities, and the places they live, including places seen sacrifice zones that often lead to more disabled people.

Access-centered making questions how and who is allowed information. This approach is a small action towards the multi-faceted problem solving and systems shifting we desperately need, though, I see it as no less important. These pieces are layering "I am alive" in Braille grade 1 in different forms. In this jar is a photo transparency of a recently burned boreal forest. The piece on the right is something I'm thinking about in how to make photographs in gallery spaces touchable. This image is of the Fortymile caribou herd and is in a field bursting pink with fireweed, and also in a recently burned area. I've been leaning into cross-disability communication as a way to approach the complicated questions, by creating what I'm calling *beyond visual or sensory based work*. Cross-disability access is a process of shifting ways of thinking and approaching something to recognize that there are many ways of knowing and doing. This access asks us to consider how we care and show up for each other.

I've been experimenting a lot with touch, feeling, and movement through projection on different objects. The images here, and this work are a short video clip of cottongrass blowing in a nice gentle breeze. That could be projected over books in Braille, where participants could page through the book while the cottongrass video clip plays on a loop. The piece could have a sound component that plays a subtle rustling of the cottongrass, and has a translated audio description. I want to note that these videos that I'm sharing have no sound. But one thing that I'm excited to start working on is adding sound captions and descriptions to short videos.

Let's dive in a little bit more about how to make the things I do as an art maker and visual maker, more accessible. I'm in the very beginning stages in some ways of learning and unlearning and trying to apply ideas and concepts into my work. One small thing that I've been doing is creating and writing image descriptions for photographs that I share online. This seems like a small act, and to some, maybe it is, and that's okay, especially for the non-social media users out there, but I think it's important to note that there is a lot to learn from disabled communities about how ablest and exclusive the internet is as a whole, but especially social media platforms, both with their design and intention.

Incorporating image descriptions in this space has gifted me a slowing down to the attention economy, to really think through what is it that I'm sharing, why am I sharing it, who am I sharing it for, and what are the videos or photographs that I'm sharing saying in conversation with the people on the receiving end.

This is a post that I made on my Instagram page, couple of weeks ago. The top caption is what is meant for everyone. The image description becomes like a limb to the caption content. Image descriptions are meant for blind and low vision people though they can help everyone who reads them to better understand the photo. I think that's really the takeaway from this small, seemingly simple act that as, M. Leona Godin said in her book, "Their Plant Eyes," quote, "accessibility does not always have to be a sterile box to be ADA compliant, but can and should provide the tools to expand the realms of art and accessibility for all." In other words, access should be something that's included from the beginning of a process rather than an afterthought, or accommodation.

My Instagram handle is deciphering change, and the caption reads, "Conversations circling around walls of rain sheets of ice and the earth body comparison of long-term drought to chronic illness as mentioned by a San Francisco meteorologist about today's Big Sur fire." The image description reads "large chunks of brown of broken river ice rest and layers on the sandbar beyond the ice the river turns as high tide and the next storms dark clouds inch closer."

If you're a social media user, and you're interested in sharing and providing images descriptions, it's also important to think about your hashtags when you're sharing with access in mind. It's important to capitalize the first letter of every word for anyone who's using a screen reader. If the words are not capitalized the screen reader will read out the hashtag letter by letter. Imagine what that would sound like. It seems pretty straightforward, but it really makes a big difference.

By asking myself these questions, my hope is that there's some kind of aliveness of the thing that I'm talking about to still be present, that any image I create, whether shared on the internet or not, holds a relational exchange or some level of reciprocity.

I regularly ask myself; how does my art give back? Like a writer wanting to bring their audience into the stories they tell, writing image descriptions has become a way of re-remembering re-engaging and paying attention to, as a way to give, to be generous. However small or large the audience may be, it allows a space for giving and taking. The act of writing, like many forms of creating, I think of is often an act of love. I think it's important to let this love become a form of support, leading to questions about our relationship to place, and people, where access is a shared responsibility and something to give like a small material, offering.

In this image here. This is an example of a portfolio submission for a grant application. For art makers most applications are now sent in online. And this had me thinking about how ablism exists in virtual art panels, so I decided to start including image descriptions in my applications, though I have not once actually been asked to include them. And I haven't received feedback if they've been helpful. I want to hope that they are.

This piece is titled "Hearing Distance." I'll read the image description: two photographs speak with each other through visible touch and sound. A black and white photograph of small icebergs and water is next to a pale colored left hand, about to catch or let go of used hearing aid batteries suspended above the hand. Some batteries are blurred and blend with the skin tone of the hand, connecting sound to positive feedback loops, connecting ice reflectivity to extraction, and air to water.

I do want to say that I have been learning so much about how to translate images from this workbook called *Alt Text as Poetry*, by artists by Bojana Coklyat and Shannon Finnegan.

I've also learned quite a bit from Georgina Kleege who had mentioned before, and I do want to say that I'm still actively learning about new approaches to creating and engaging with access in mind. And I think that it's really wonderful and exciting to be considering language and how it's used an art. There are new words being formed, old words being reformed, and there's a wonderful push-pull that happens when we try to share the more intimate and tender moments that are often fleeting moments easily captured in a photograph. Do we have the words for them?

Communication is evolving too, especially thinking about ProTactile communication that was created by members and the DeafBlind community where, touches prioritized.

I know that image descriptions are only one small way to create an inclusive space. I think they can help us think more deeply and broadly about the sighted world and ask who it is built for and how can we rethink ablest approaches to visual art and everyday experiences.