

*Interrogating Access*  
Residency –  
Alexis Bulman:  
*Tending To*



Presentation by Alexis Bulman  
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This presentation is part of *Interrogating Access*, a series of talks and workshops on accessibility in art and media production developed by OBORO and Spectrum Productions with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts. OBORO and Spectrum Productions acknowledge that their activities take place in Tiohtià:ke, an unceded Kanien'kehá:ka territory.

**(Beginning of transcription)**

Alexis Bulman:

Hi everyone!

I'll start out by providing a visual description of myself and the place where I am filming.

My name is Alexis Bulman. I am a woman in her late twenties with short, dark blonde hair and blue eyes. I'm wearing an orangey-brown shirt with a collar and white buttons. I am speaking from my home art studio, and just behind me is a wooden shelf full of art supplies.

I'll also mention that right now, I'm having a TMJ disorder flare-up, which means my jaw is a little stiff and locked. So if I'm having some difficulty speaking today, and pronouncing words, that's why. So please, be patient

with me.

I'd love to thank OBORO and Spectrum Productions for hosting and launching the *Interrogating Access* Residency, and providing support while I got to engage in this entire process. Throughout the residency, I've been able to do research, attend all the speaking events. I got to absorb a lot of new information and meet a lot of new people.

Although it wasn't necessary—there was no pressure for me to create artwork—I decided to make two projects as a way of implementing the information that I was absorbing. I'm a visual-tactile learner, so it made sense for me to do that. Those two artworks that I made during this residency are what I'll be speaking about in this video.

But before I do, I thought I would give a little context about my disability and my art practice leading up to this residency, because both of those things informed how I spent my time during this residency.

A very long story made short, I have scoliosis and spinal fusion. Scoliosis, for those who don't know, is a curvature of the spine. I saw a specialist for many years, and toward the end of my time with that specialist, I was told by them that as I got older and my body aged, I should just “learn my limitations,” “respect my limitations,” and to “not overdo it.” That's very abstract advice, because often we don't know our limitations until we've overdone it, which is always the case for me. “Overdoing it” for me usually means to over-exert myself physically, usually by lifting something that's too heavy, doing something for too long, or doing something in an awkward position. All of these things result in pain.

That's relevant information because the kind of artworks that I love to make are durational performances, and sculptures and installations that are labour intensive. And so, the physicality of these kinds of art-making is directly at odds with my body.

In recent years, I've started making my artwork about scoliosis and my experiences with disability. But doing so has also doubled as a way for me to learn more about my body and its limitations, or about breaking through limitations that I thought were my limitations, and it turns out I can surpass them.

Considering my own body in my art practice has had really positive results for me, and it made me really excited to embrace and expand my lens of accessibility, to think beyond my own body and to accommodate for a more diverse range of bodies and experiences.

For the *Interrogating Access* Residency, I set an objective for myself. That objective was to research and experiment with tools that could stimulate accessible encounters through media art. After a few months in the residency of learning about new tools and technology, I felt really excited about audio description and 360 product photography. I thought both of these could unlock potential for increased access in the kind of artwork that I was already making. I decided to focus on those two things, and create artworks that would use those technologies. Ultimately, my overall goal was to create artwork through a lens of accessibility, as opposed to thinking about disability as an afterthought, when the project was already finished.

From this residency, I ended up creating two projects: one is a performance artwork called *Tending To*, and the other is a series of five sculptures made from drywall, called the *Remodel* series.

The *Remodel* sculptures are made from drywall, which is a heavy and awkward material. Since a goal of mine was to account for my body while I was making this artwork, it meant that I had to take this kind of material and make the pieces smaller, lighter and more manageable. I opted for snapping sheets of drywall into smaller pieces, and then arranging them by size. Or, for other sculptures, I smashed the drywall apart, and then intuitively and painstakingly reassembled the remains.

Both my body and my sculptures benefited from this customized approach to art-making. I was experiencing less pain than I have building previous art projects, and because I was spending more time looking and reflecting on my building progress than actually building, it meant I wasn't overworking the sculptures, which kept them feeling nice and fresh.

In addition to considering my body while building these sculptures, I had to think about the sculptures as if they were already 360-degree product photographs. For context, 360 photographs are a series of images of an object photographed in sequence on a turntable. When the images are

displayed online, the viewer can rotate and pan around the object, and zoom in.

With this technology in mind, I had to consider the sculpture from every possible composition and angle, and I had to account for the fact that the viewer might zoom in. So the attention to detail really had to be there, meaning the tactility of the drywall material needed to feel exaggerated and rich, and lively enough to compete with the flatness of a photograph. I wanted these sculptures to feel engaging to look at, in person and online, and to be engaging the feel, and to describe, and to read a description of.

For my video performance *Tending To*, I researched audio description extensively, and then I attempted to write, voice, record and edit the entire audio description myself. But despite my research and my good intentions, I realized very quickly that as a sighted person, I did not know what should or should not be included in that script. And if I had done it all myself, it would not have been a mode of entry for a blind or low-vision audience. In fact, it may have even become a barrier. So, in this area of the project I decided to let go of the creative reins, and I sought out the advice of a local Montreal company who specialize in audio description.

The company I went with was really fantastic, and they worked with contemporary artists in the past. They were excited and eager to take on a collaborative approach with me. By collaborative approach, I mean we had an open discussion about what the performance was, what it meant to me, what it tailed, and then I sent them the video. They wrote the first draft of the audio description script and sent it to me, and I got to make any edits and changes.

Here is a short clip of the *Tending To* performance and its audio description. After it ends, I'll open the floor to any questions about these artworks or my experience with the *Interrogating Access* Residency.

Thank you.

[Computer-synthesized voice:]

A woman wearing a green jumpsuit and white sneakers enters the space. She faces a bare white wall. Drops of paint stain the grey concrete floor.

The wall is marked with nail holes, cracks and dents.

She examines the damages to the wall.

She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a thin white strip. She sticks it to the wall.

In her fingers, she holds a butterfly-stitch packet. She peels off the waxed backing and it flutters to the ground. She adheres the stitch to a pin-sized hole on the wall, and presses it down with both thumbs.

**(End of transcription)**

Transcription by: Marie Lauzon

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