Redefining Access to Visual Art | A literature scan on accessibility in art education

Personal Statement
I first started thinking about accessibility in design as a student in graduate school, when our conservation expert shared an article entitled Typography and the Aging Eye: Typeface Legibility for Older Viewers with Vision Problems. She reminded us that the donors many of us could be working with would be aging, and we ought to consider that in our printed materials.

Since then, I have worked to educate myself on the legal and personal burdens shouldered by those who identify as disabled. Thanks to Kate Thornhill for our early conversations on accessibility in Digital Scholarship, which led me to confront problems in the art world around accessibility. Over the past year (2018-2019) I have had to navigate my job as a newly-identified disabled person, which has been a surprisingly uncomfortable and unsatisfying process. I have yet to uncover a unified theory that will be useful to art librarians, but I hope to share the increased facility I have gained with the topics. Above all, I hope to continue learning about work being done to destigmatize disabilities, as well as to problematize art history and studio art with disability studies. As librarians, there are many ways to begin this work.

Methodology and search terms
I searched my home library catalog, covering books, journal subscriptions, and databases.

Search terms: Art OR Art History OR Studio Art AND accessibility OR disability

Web searches: Accessibility in art history/studio art/education

Other terms surfaced:
Disability studies

Literature Findings
Full bibliography available through Zotero, link below, QR code at lower right.

https://www.zotero.org/groups/2309199/accessartarlis

Conclusion: Museums are the institutions most easily surfaced as sites of innovative inclusion, in particular for low-sighted visitors. I found 7 non-scholarly articles in my search that mentioned 3-d printing initiatives at museums. One of those mentioned "sensory loss" and art more generally, but vision is the focus.

Most scholarly works were concentrated in Disability Studies Quarterly. Four articles that I reviewed again dealt with low-sighted individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including jobs, schools, transportation, and all public and private places that are open to the general public. The purpose of the law is to make sure that people with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities as everyone else.

The law covers Employment, which is regulated by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity commission; Public Services of the State and Government, and Public Accommodations and services Operated by Private Entities, regulated by the Department of Justice; Telecommunications, regulated by the FCC; and Miscellaneous Provisions. Educational institutions and Museums fall under Titles II and III. https://data.org/factsheet/ADA-overview

Universal Design: Universal design is "the process of creating products that are accessible to people with a wide range of abilities, disabilities, and other characteristics. Universally designed products accommodate individual preferences and abilities; communicate necessary information effectively (regardless of ambient conditions or the user’s sensory abilities); and can be approached, reached, manipulated, and used regardless of the individual’s body size, posture, or mobility. Application of universal design principles minimizes the need for assistive technology, results in products compatible with assistive technology, and makes products more usable by everyone, not just people with disabilities.

Issues
"Disability" is not the most useful umbrella term. How each person regards their own abilities may be a personal choice that becomes tempered by seeking their legal accommodations. Disability Studies and Crip Theory offer balance and nuance when there is little to be found in the law. Additionally, library standards need to catch up with users. See screenshot from Getty AAT at left, showing an entry for "intellectual disability, the only search result for disability, which labels outdated terms as offensive.

Terms and Definitions
Accessibility: the design of products, devices, services, or environments for people with disabilities.

ADA: The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. "The ADA is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including jobs, schools, transportation, and all public and private places that are open to the general public. The purpose of the law is to make sure that people with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities as everyone else."

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Digital Publishing

This online toolkit was developed in part through a workshop at the University of Michigan Ann Arbor in December, 2016. The workshop included many librarians and especially Visual Resources Association members.

The toolkit provides invaluable resources for incorporating accessibility work into digital projects. Textual elements that are available through all reading technologies, including body, caption, alt text and long descriptions, are leveraged to describe visual elements.

https://describingvisualresources.org/

Suggested Reading