

# UC Santa Cruz

## Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal

### Title

What Does It Mean to Be Truly Open Access?

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/77f2z4g6>

### Journal

Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal, 5(2)

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### Publication Date

2023

### DOI

10.5070/R75259837

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## What Does It Mean to Be Truly Open Access?

Kate Korroch

Coeditor, *Visual Studies*

In 2016, when my colleagues and I founded *Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal*, we spent several sessions making mind maps to generate and settle upon a name for the journal. “Refract” is where we landed, aptly reflecting our aim to break up and reallocate how we produce, present, and grapple with the dissemination of ideas. The element of the title that did not require extensive discussion was “open access.” We instinctively knew that we wanted the journal’s content, contributors, and readership to be as broad and inclusive as possible. Because of that, we prioritized publishing on a digital platform. Digital publishing is an inherent characteristic of open access. But what exactly is open access? How does it encourage innovative scholarship? How does it perpetuate or dissolve academic gate-keeping?

Director of the Harvard Open Access Project, Peter Suber, has been chronicling and writing about open access since the early aughts, defining it as follows: “Open-access (OA) literature is digital, online, free of charge, and free of most copyright and licensing restrictions.”<sup>1</sup> This delineation focuses on overcoming the pragmatic obstacles of circulating publications. OA is pragmatically accessible; it is not a book available only for purchase or a study behind a paywall. Among various articulated tenets, Suber reflects that OA does not equal universal access; language and ability are still pervasive hurdles to accessing materials. That raises the question, what is required for a publication to become truly open access?

*Merriam-Webster* uses phrases like “accessible on . . . or nearly all sides” and “having no closing or confining barrier” to define “open.”<sup>2</sup> The dictionary

describes “access” as “permission, liberty, or ability to enter” and “freedom or ability to obtain.”<sup>3</sup> *Open* and *access* together release boundaries and barriers, and permit free entry. In many ways, OA digital publishing does just that. Where Su-ber’s description gives language and disability a quick nod, *Refract*’s OA approach strives for a nuance that expands not just who can click on what but how and why that engagement happens.

On *Refract*’s academic digital publishing platform, the journal’s material moves into nontraditionally academic production and reception. In volume 1, “Re- fraction,” Erick Msumanje contributed his film *VOLTA VOLTA* (2017). The work was accompanied by an artist’s statement by collaborator Alexis Hithe. Msumanje’s film and Hithe’s artist statement reflect on “ritual” and “digital” spaces; they discuss the black body and the digital experience and documentary. Editorial board member Kristen Laciste interviewed Msumanje and Hithe, to pro- vide a deeper context for *VOLTA VOLTA*. Here, *Refract* highlighted critical visual cultural output outside the bounds of traditional articles. In the interview Msumanje, Hithe, and Laciste elaborated on the ideas within the piece, creating an access that is not simply the opportunity to successfully click on a link but a calling- in to the actual material. At the end of the interview, Msumanje reflects on their conversation and the medium:

I was thinking about listening. What is listening? How do we listen? And how are we trained to listen to certain sounds, and why do we hear certain sounds and leave others out? What does the sonic say about the human experience in general? In connection to *VOLTA VOLTA* I’ve been thinking about the concept of listening. To me, listening is seeing. Listening is reading. Listening is connecting.<sup>4</sup>

The scholar and filmmaker speculates on the hierarchies of what we hear and see and how we experience our world. “Listening is seeing.” Msumanje’s expansion of the senses is a thread that *Refract* prioritizes both for the dynamic engagement with ideas but also to flesh out materials in a way that makes them intellectually reach- able.

In the second volume, “Translation,” *Refract* deliberately took up intersec- tions of the senses and troubled the assumption that we access materials in a com- mon way. In part, Antoni Abad’s project, *La Venezia che non si vede / Unveiling the Unseen* (2017) at the Venice Biennale inspired our approach. In Abad’s project the city was mapped through sound by people who were blind or visually impaired. They offered tours to Biennale goers, to share the experience. Implicitly, the piece was not only about disability and access but also about translation of language. The

Venice Biennale is a cosmopolitan event, and attendees come from all over the globe. Spoken languages may not be shared, but perhaps languages of the senses can help bridge the gap of communication and experience. Pairing creative articulations of access with Msumanje's contemplation that rearticulates the senses, for "Translation" we focused on contributions that spoke to access and the senses more explicitly.

Alexandra C. Moore's piece for the volume, "All le moto a ces droits: Notes on Hervé Youmbi's Translation of the Déclaration Universelle des Droits de l'Homme (DUDH)," brings together translations of language, history, and imagery. Moore presents images of signs in situ around Douala, Cameroon. Each sign features a select article from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>5</sup> The declaration was first written in English and French; Youmbi signs translate the original text into Camfranglais, a vernacular of Cameroon. On the journal's page, each image is accompanied with typed Camfranglais taken from the text on the sign, an English translation of that, a description of the artwork, and cultural social contextualization of its significance. Moore presents these layers of access to the complex histories of language and colonialism in Cameroon with criticality and care and offers an inviting and deep examination of Youmbi's work with multiple entry points of access.

Continuing to interrogate access and the tools available to do so, two additional contributors used various media to call attention to the disconnection and fracturing that happens for deaf people in a world designed predominantly for people who hear. In "Craptions: Instagram Notes from Joseph Grigely," the artist presents various social media posts documenting the perplexing and absurd glitches he encounters navigating his daily life. Accompanying an image of a professional baseball player on the pitcher's mound captioned with gibberish, Grigely says, "We are approaching the fiftieth anniversary of putting a man on the moon and still can't get right the technology for captioning."<sup>6</sup> The tone is exasperated and even playful but points to a very serious example of deep-seated inequity. Moving off the page, Marrok Sedgwick's film *Untitled (Speech Poem #2)* privileges the disabled viewer, creating content most accessible to a d/Deaf viewer and walking the viewer through the different voices available to them for communicating. Their voice in the film is signing, writing, and body language. Sedgwick critiques that which is left out of translation—emotion, tone, and more—and "subverts this obfuscation of meaning, turning the tables to privilege disabled communities over non-disabled communities."<sup>7</sup>

The rest of the volume "Translation" and the volumes that follow strive to "obfuscate meaning" in order to reroute pathways of knowledge, making and engaging to enrich the existing dialogues and stretch to new communities of

thinkers. When *Refract* was founded, being an open access journal meant we could use a digital platform that allowed us to make something. It was also a guidepost ideology that offered an expansiveness within academic publishing that I hope continues to be rigorously dynamic and continually assessed.

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Kate Korroch is Co-Editor of *Visual Studies* and a PhD Candidate in Visual Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Korroch was the founding managing editor of *Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal*. Korroch recently curated *What is an image?* for the International Visual Sociology annual conference and they are currently working on a project about femininities and the Korean Wave. Korroch contributed a chapter titled “The Isolated Queer Body: Harisu's Dodo Cosmetics Advertisements” to *Queer Asia: Decolonising and Reimagining Sexuality and Gender* (Zed Books, 2019), and “Cover Guys: Trans Male Portraits from *Original Plumbing Magazine*” in *Art Journal* (2021).

Many thanks to Rachel Bonner, Maureen McGuire, and the *Refract* Editorial Board for inviting me to contribute to this issue. Thank you to Alex Moore and Stacy Schwartz for their insights and feedback on these ideas.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Peter Suber, Open Access Overview (Definition, Introduction),” accessed September 19, 2022, <http://legacy.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/overview.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “open,” accessed September 19, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/open>.

<sup>3</sup> *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “access,” accessed September 19, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/access>.

<sup>4</sup> Erick Msumanje, Alexis Hithe, and Kristen Laciste, “In Conversation with Erick Msumanje and Alexis Hithe,” *Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2018): 33–34, <https://doi.org/10.5070/R71141458>.

<sup>5</sup> Alexandra C. Moore, “All le moto a ces droits: Notes on Hervé Youmbi’s Translation of the Déclaration Universelle des Droits de l’Homme (DUDH),” *Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal* 2, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.5070/R72145862>.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Grigely, “Craptions: Instagram Notes from Joseph Grigely,” *Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal* 2, no. 1 (2019): 19, <https://doi.org/10.5070/R72145852>.

<sup>7</sup> Marrok Sedgwick, “Untitled (Speech Poem #2),” *Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal* 2, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.5070/R72145861>.