



The 2017 Accessibility Conference:  
**Becoming a Catalyst  
for Inclusion**  
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## Are Art Venues for Everyone? Only if you can get through the door.

### Transcript from the 2017 Accessibility Conference

Silvia Guido, AccesTO & Kim Fullerton, Akimbo Art Promotions & Consulting

For more information, contact:

[info@accessto.ca](mailto:info@accessto.ca)

[kimful@akimbo.ca](mailto:kimful@akimbo.ca)



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SPEAKER:

Hi, everyone, our session for today is Are art venues for everyone? Only if you can get through the door.

Sylvia is a physiotherapist who specialises in rehabilitation. She started an online blog which has evolved into AccesTO, a non-profit organisation which provides audits to venues, related to disability. AccesTO has paired up with Akimbo to create Access Visual Art.

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Kim is the founder of Akimbo, a Toronto based company, which promotes art media nationally and internationally. Over the years she began to note the various physical barriers in our community and has established Access Visual Art. This is a network of organisations working at the crossroad of art and disability. It is designed to alleviate the problems individuals with disability encounter in relation to art galleries and studios.

SILVIA GUIDO:

Hello everybody, thank you for coming to see our presentation. I'm going to start out with a question for you. How many art galleries in the GTA do you think are wheelchair accessible? Any ideas? So there is 150 galleries in the city.

SPEAKER:

A lot of them are in lower, heritage buildings, so my impression would be, not very many.

KIM FULLERTON:

Anyone want to counter that? The answer is, we don't know. Because that data doesn't exist anywhere. Based on my own personal experience from being a wheelchair user, and other people that I know who are using mobility devices, it is very low.

Based on that knowledge and frustration of the experience we were having in terms of physical barriers – because our project is focusing on physical barriers – we decided to form a collective of people, comprised of people with disabilities, the cultural sector and disability sector to try and answer this question and bring the people who need it most, mobility device users, and the families and friends who need to access spaces that have barriers.

I have been in a wheelchair for five years, and involved in the visual arts sector before that. My disability, being in a wheelchair, became a big shock for me, and my relationship to the art world completely changed because I couldn't access it in the same way.

I met a woman called Elaine Stewart who was in a wheelchair who expressed frustration, especially in relation to the business I was running for access. We founded AVA and invited three other people to become involved. One of those three is Sylvia Guido, who runs AccesTO. Another is an OCAD professor who is the father of a son with disability, and another person who identifies as a person with disabilities.

We decided our project was getting bigger than we could handle, so we applied and were lucky

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to get two entrants from OCAD University's program and also from Ryerson. And with funding from the Toronto Arts Council, we have been able to hire a short-term project coordinator and web design team.

SILVIA GUIDO:

The two main partners of Access Visual Art is AccessTO and Akimbo. We are representing these organisations here today. Has anyone heard of AccessTO?

I will go into it in a bit more detail after, but I started it four years ago with my brother, who is a construction manager. We thought that there needed to be a reliable source in the city, where people can go and get information, about mainly entertainment venues, restaurants, bars, cafes, live music venues.

I went with my measuring tape and camera and started blogging about it and now it has turned into this great project where we have teamed up with the University of Toronto, and we get all of our volunteers from the occupational therapy masters program, where they volunteer with us for 12 months, or longer. But usually that is how long their stay has been.

They train and provide their own review of any venue they choose, once a month. We add one new venue a week. We would like that to grow, but it is all volunteer right now. We just became a not for profit organisation and are looking for funding, but that is how we are looking to run.

And then Akimbo...

KIM FULLERTON:

Is anyone familiar with Akimbo art promotions? We started 17 years ago with an email list, a website and social media. Through the platforms we reach 200,000 people per month. Through our campaigns to promote, we have 300-400 visual art clients from coast to coast, primarily museums and galleries. And we promote activities and events throughout platforms to various users who subscribe to us.

SILVIA GUIDO:

We thought it would be great to combine each of our users. Kim knows the art community and I am sort of in the accessibility community in Toronto. We thought this might also be a neat project for AccessTO. Because right now we use a criteria list that has been growing and

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modified over the last four years. We do use the City of London standards, if anyone is interested.

But we hadn't really been exploring art venues, which tackled things like how high photography or art would be displayed on walls, and things like that. We thought this would be a great way to incorporate a lot of the stuff into our criteria list and make it like the gold standard, at one point.

The purpose of AVA, the main purpose is, we really want to collect as much information as we can about the accessibility. Whether bad or good, of all the art venues in Ontario. We want to disseminated and documented on various platforms, including Akimbo and AccesTO's website.

Then we want to provide reliable and accurate information that we can put into tools for organisations to hopefully get them working towards more accessible space. Because like Kim mentioned at the beginning, we have estimated that many venues are not. We want to make sure everybody knows this with some quantitative data and we can work towards making them more accessible.

There are three projects being undertaken under this initiative. We are actually in the middle of it right now. The first one, the Open Access Database. A lot of meetings and discussion. This is the first place where we are really talking about it.

If you have any questions later, we are going over a lot of these topics briefly, so please ask at the end.

The first one is to get the database up and going, then we want to create resource tools. We are hoping to host a symposium in the fall, somewhere in Toronto, to allow different organisations to come and get an idea of what is going on in the art community related to accessibility and how they can make a change.

I will start off by talking about the open access database. We are hoping to get the information two ways. We realised early on there was a lot of art venues. And right now, how AccesTO works, we hit the ground running and review places, maybe one or two reviews a week.

But if we wanted to get the information within an appropriate amount of time, we would have

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to figure out a way to perhaps get some of these businesses to give us the information, instead of visiting all of them.

A survey was created by myself and Kim, and we sent it to a few different organisations for their input. We tried to make it as concise as possible with 10 questions, hoping for a higher response rate. It has been out for about six weeks and we have had a 15% response rate. So we're leaving it open for the whole summer for people to get back to us, sending reminder emails. We are working through that.

Then, a big chunk of this is formal reviews. That trained accessibility auditors will be visiting as many venues as possible. The advantage is that a lot of these art spaces are in certain neighbourhoods in the city, so we're hoping it won't be too time-consuming that way. And we are trying to recruit as many people as possible that can be trained and go out and do these audits.

Right now, the majority of them are the current volunteers for AccessTO and we are trying to find people within the arts community and the disabled community to assist us with this.

The main thing that we really want to do with the audits is to have at least one person either with a disability or within the arts community visit the venue, because some of the volunteers in AccessTO right now are able-bodied, or from the healthcare industry, like myself – I'm a physiotherapist. And it might not be, I guess, we'd like it to be as enriching as possible, these audits. People coming in from different perspectives.

A few details, training is mainly done as a whole group, and then each of the auditors go out with a more experienced auditor for first time, and once they are more comfortable with the process, they go out on their own. This is something they are working through right now because the first audit is hopefully tomorrow. So we are piecing through this.

And we are currently using a criteria list based off of the AccessTO criteria list, with a few features added in for age friendly, and things related to an art institution or an exhibit.

Our timeline right now, we're hoping for the information to be out there by September. We wanted presented to users through the Akimbo website and social media. AccessTO does not have an app right now. That is a question I get asked. It is a blog-based website and you can access it on your phone.

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The reviews will always include measurements, measurements of key features like entrances and washrooms. If there is a ramp, the ratio. We're also hoping to create some search filters. So if somebody is specifically looking for an automatic door opener, they would be able to find a venue that way. Whereas somebody might want something, they'd like to be able to get to the washroom, sort of thing, and it needs to be on the main floor.

And we are also hoping that a lot of our information can be accessed by anyone. This piece, we are hoping that people ask permission from the AODA, it will be accessible to anyone, the information from the survey.

Here is a picture of the main page of AccessTO, but I'm just going to show you the website. The reason I'm showing the website is because of the information we're hoping is going to end up in this category.

Right now AccessTO only adds venues that are accessible, but that is something that is changing as soon as the art information becomes available, because we want to include every venue, and let people know whether they have partial features, or are not accessible. So this will be changed to spaces, instead of accessible spaces, and our venues will be at the top of this list. That is where that can be accessed.

On the Akimbo website...

KIM FULLERTON:

We send out about 30,000-40,000 emails to our subscriber base. Those are opt-in lists, either way, we are not spamming people. And that is usually about an art exhibition opening or launch, or something like that.

All of the email that gets sent out is also posted to our website and we also post content to the site that doesn't get emailed out.

This is the format of what our emails look like. Text and pictures, and at the bottom is the contact and address. What we want to do on our emails and mobile content is include an icon somewhere around the address of the venue. We have not yet determined what these icons will look like, but they will signify either accessible, partially accessible or not accessible. Or there may be an icon that says 'for accessibility details on this venue, click here'.

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Then it will go over to the full details of the survey result on the AccessTO site. That is how we are linking it.

One of the really important ideas for the project is education and outreach. Because many art venues, especially in the private sector, commercial galleries, are not accessible, or partially accessible. We don't want to wag fingers, or put red strikeout dots over them, we want to have conversations to talk about how there may be simple solutions to the barriers at their spaces.

And part of the outreach is through the survey and phone calls, and part of it will be through resource tools that we will build into the AccessTO website, and possibly into Akimbo's as well.

A place where art venues can go to find out a range of resources that will help them. Because many people in art venues are telling me there is a will but no resources. The government may put into place regulations and rules for clients, but it doesn't come with financial support for art venues to follow through and cover those costs.

So we want to include resources on available funding, on what the AODA standards are, and how they apply to various sizes of institutions, how the building code and human rights code applies to these standards and regulations. Where to find somebody who can build you an accessible washroom, or an architect who can build an accessible venue from the ground up. Or as simple as where to find a ramp.

The resource tools are part of what we are considering as part of our outreach, and educational encouragement to make change in their attitudes and actions.

The third component of the AVA project is a symposium we will hold in Toronto, because that is where we are based. And that is tied into the survey, the audits and resource tools.

The symposium is hopefully a place we can bring a variety of types of people together. People who are managers and directors, galleries, artists, people who want to, have a conversation about what is going on in our venues and how we can make them more accessible and barrier free.

We will be inviting people to make presentations at the symposium who are artists with disabilities, people who have specialties in architecture and design, with barrier-free design. It

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is important to get our art managers there, the people who are making decisions about these things. Funders, who can speak to available funding, or listen to the funding needs expressed by these venues, and representatives from government who can talk about AODA and best practices.

I wanted to talk about the impact of inaccessibility, or spaces that are not accessible. We hear a lot about the economic benefits of having people with disabilities in our workplaces and involved in our organisations. I wanted to talk a bit about the impact it has on artists and professionals working in the arts sector, who have disabilities. Again, I'm talking about physical disabilities at this point because that is what our project and funding is focused on.

When artists are excluded from galleries, studios and events, they lose opportunities to learn and network, and find out what other artists are doing, have conversations, talk to dealers, directors, curators. Essentially all those things that we do in the art world to help build our career. Because the social career of being an artist is extremely important.

As curators, we can go in and look at exhibitions and spaces that are barrier free, because curators often go to look at artworks in other galleries, as well as studios.

If we are reviewers or writers, we can't cover those exhibitions. And all of these people are potential audiences, collectors, critics, patrons and employees.

SILVIA GUIDO:

My feeling is that people in the art world can and should play a leadership role in working towards inclusivity and barrier-free spaces in the arts sector. By working together and addressing sector-wide issues of accessibility and exclusion, we can work together to contribute towards new thinking, action and best practices toward the goal of building more barrier-free communities.

So, that's our presentation. And now we welcome any questions, if anyone has any, about our project.

QUESTION FROM FLOOR:

Thank you for the presentation, very insightful. I wasn't aware of the access issues. A couple of questions come to mind. You mentioned trained accessibility auditors and I'm wondering how one achieves that status. Is it certified, or does Joe Blow come and volunteer, and now he is an

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auditor?

SILVIA GUIDO:

I have been called an accessibility auditor now, for four years, because I have gone in and modified and created this criteria list, and I think we have been quite successful training a lot of the students from the University of Toronto going out there. But to my knowledge, there is no certification on this. I feel there are a few of us in the city, that we have been trying to talk to city officials, and there is Certified for Access, but that is for businesses, not people that want to provide the services.

I feel like we're doing a decent job, coming out and doing the audits, because we're touching on things that are being overlooked a lot of the time. So the training is happening to AccesTO.

KIM FULLERTON:

I just recently saw the auditors' checklist for Sylvia and her team at AccesTO. There are 51 points on it, questions and things to look at. It is extremely extensive.

Another question?

QUESTION FROM FLOOR:

Just wondering if you attended the 1:00 session with a keynote speaker who addressed an initiative she calls Access Now. I don't know if it is an exact parallel, but it sure seems like there is a lot in common happening between you and her, and her desire to get information on accessibility. Are you looking at cooperating, or coming together in any way?

SILVIA GUIDO:

We know her...

KIM FULLERTON:

There is a couple of things. When Elaine and I were researching AVA to start it, we knew we wanted to partner with somebody already doing this in the disability sector. We looked at 8-10 websites and apps that were doing that, including Access Now.

There are many reasons that we went with AccesTO. One is that the information is accurate, because someone has been there to photograph it. We found that crowdsourcing information is often not accurate. That is a drawback for Access Now and many other crowd sites.

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Some of the sites only exist based on Google Maps, so that was another drawback. And Access Now was not able to create a category just for art gallery. As far as I know, you still can't select by type of venue.

In the art sector, especially in one city, you want to set up proximities, so that people can do a tour, for example. It was important to us to be able to create a category. I think what Access Now does, is incredible and important for outreach and advocacy and consciousness-raising, but it just didn't offer us the robust engine that we needed.

Are any of the people in the room involved in art venues, art galleries? Visual art, artists?

SPEAKER:

I might go into one once in a while...

KIM FULLERTON:

OCAD is very involved in our project. We have interns and one executive member.

SPEAKER:

So, stay tuned for the information. Any other questions?

A lot of people today have been talking about the importance of attitudinal shift. I wondered if you wanted to talk about the role of art in that shift.

KIM FULLERTON:

I have had different kinds of conversations. Many of the publicly funded galleries will often say there is a will towards accessibility. There may not be perceived attitudinal problems or issues, but there is a bit of passing of the buck. The money, the space belongs to a landlord, that kind of stuff.

The private sector galleries are a bit of a harder nut to crack, and I think that will be more difficult, in terms of convincing them that having people with disabilities in their spaces is of benefit.

And then there are galleries that are taking a far more proactive position, in particular in Toronto there is a gallery called Tangled Art Gallery, which was originally called Tangled Art and

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Disability, I guess that is its incorporated name. It produces a lot of different kinds of art. In its history, it has produced a lot of theatre and performance and visual art. Right now it is focusing on visual art, because it started to rent a gallery about a year ago. And so much of its programming is gallery based.

But they have spent an inordinate amount of time and money figuring out how to make that space as accessible as they possibly can for all kinds of accessibility needs. They are, I think, at the forefront of dealing with that kind of shift. It is not impossible to do. And a second very important thing they're doing is developing a social enterprise project, which is to set up a consultancy business.

Because there are so many different kinds of cultural institutions calling them now and requesting consultations from them, "How do we create a relaxed theatre situation? How do we create a sensory experience for our gallery-goers? How do we do this?"

Right now, they are working fast and furious to put this together. Because as we know, funding for galleries is always diminishing, and so any means of becoming more self-sufficient is important. But the information they have to convey what they have learned and how they can help other galleries to become more accessible is going to be available shortly.

SPEAKER:

Great, thank you very much. Any other questions? Please join me in thanking our presenters again.

(Applause)

SPEAKER:

We also have a small token of our appreciation, University of Guelph honey.

SILVIA GUIDO:

Wonderful, thank you.

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