

Through My Lens: An Act of Telling in Exchange

James Long, Amy Amantea, and Nico Dicecco

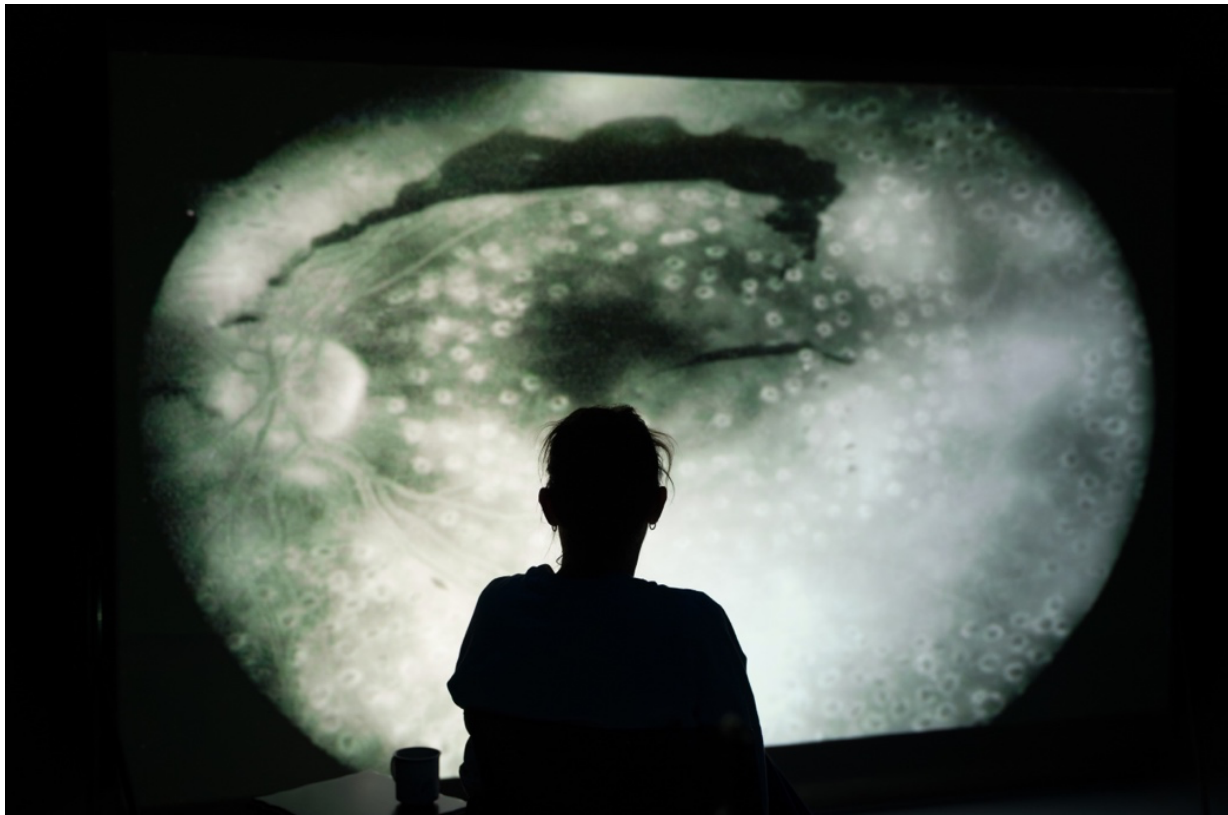


Figure 1. FOLDA Festival, Kingston, Ontario, 2022.
Photo by Jay Middaugh.

Image description: The image is of an audience member sitting in front of the projection of a very large medical image of the interior of Amy's eye.

Beginnings

During a 2021 online workshop hosted by Vancouver's Theatre Replacement and led by performance maker Tania El-Khoury, Amy first proposed the idea of having people describe her photographs—

photographs that she had never seen—back to her. This simple action immediately resonated through the Zoom-boxed faces gathered during a COVID moment, when any act of human exchange was collectively longed for. We wanted to share. We wanted to make. We wanted to relate.

For context, Amy is an actor, writer, access consultant, and advocate with a lived experience of blindness; specifically, she has a total of 2 percent vision in one eye. She is also a photographer whose practice includes walking the city at dawn or dusk, “the golden hour,” looking for interesting light patterns and capturing them with her camera. This is a skill she developed over the last decade through a mentorship with sighted photographer Rick Hulbert.

The emerging project, *Through My Lens*, aimed to bring this practice and Amy’s associated life experiences into a photography studio/performance space where she could share her work as a photographer with someone who would then describe her images back to her. The hope was to create a tourable piece of contemporary performance out of this action: a performance built collaboratively; a performance whose form came into focus through its making; and a performance that still has the capacity to shift as the core creators negotiate our deepening relationships with both each other and the vast spectrum of individuals Amy welcomes in to engage with her photographs.

This written reflection is comprised of individual writing, scripted and unscripted moments from the performance, and transcribed moments from conversations following the most recent run of the work in 2024. Our considerations focus on three identified exchanges that took place during the development and presentation of the piece: the first one between Amy and audience; the next between Amy and media designer/operator Nico in their attempt to make a digital representation of Amy’s vision; and finally, the ongoing conversation between Amy and director James regarding the ultimate function of the performance and how any attempt at overt disability advocacy—a field in which Amy works—might interfere with the potential for theatrical abstraction in the piece.

Accessibility and Exchange

Through My Lens was created over six weeks of in-studio research that began as an inquiry into modes of access. With respect to the work's development, we hoped to bake visual description into our process from the outset and to creatively address an access need we saw as essential to public performance.

In addition to this pragmatic desire to make work more inherently accessible, the research also asked multiple questions, including: What does it mean for sighted individuals to provide descriptions of photographs to a photographer who took them but cannot see them? Could this action expand inside an accessibility framework to provide access to Amy's photos to non-sighted audience members? How and when does the control of access move amongst the various participants taking part in the work? Now when we reflect on our six-week development period, it is clear that at some point the creative research re-focused from an inquiry into access toward what felt like a more reciprocal and intentional investigation of exchange. Prioritizing exchange, and how it might differ from and occasionally challenge notions of access, allowed for a more complex and dynamic series of collaborative investigations in studio and eventually, contributed to a richer sequence of dramatic actions in performance.

When considering the relationship between access and exchange as we defined them (access being afforded and exchange having a more dynamic back and forth relationship), *reciprocity* was a word that came up almost immediately, as did *power*. Each word carries built-in tensions. Access is designed to be granted or earned, and it can be accepted or denied. Exchange may have more potential for negotiation based on its inherent relationality, including misunderstandings, repetitions, conflicts, and transformations; and for the purposes of performance—even in the post-dramatic realm that the creators hope to inhabit—actions of exchange may simply make for a better structure, character, and, ultimately, show. Through an extended process of studio-based learning, we developed a more nuanced understanding of both access and exchange and eventually established a more reciprocal and collaborative dramaturgy of accessibility *through* exchange.

Exchange Number 1: The Artist–Audience Contract

As with many performance works, the relationship with the audience starts with some knowledge of the piece and its concept. This information may be delivered via word of mouth, a poster, a social media post, festival program, or another form of advertising, and committed to with the purchase of the ticket. We felt that the title, *Through My Lens*, accompanied with the promotional text describing a blind photographer sharing their work with a sighted participant who describes those photographs back, was a clear and compelling proposal.

At the start of the version of the show for small audiences, and prior to offering any of her photos for description, Amy proposes another transaction for her audience. It is perhaps even an imposition: “I have to take a few photographs of the group this evening. This is a show about photography after all, and I’m hoping that we’re okay with this?” (Amantea and Guest 2024). With this, Amy engages in the first action of *taking*—one that an audience ultimately has little to push back against, short of following her up on the option of covering their faces, which, as far as we recall, none did.

Immediately following comes a more nuanced series of exchanges where Amy initiates the more complicated exercise of choosing which of the gathered audience members will join her on stage as the person responsible for describing her work back to her that evening.

So, what I would love from one of you, in fact, what I need from one of you, is for you to join me up here and describe my photos—because I’ve never really seen them—and to allow me to take some portraits of you while we do this. . . . There’s quite a few of us here tonight, which I’m so grateful for, and this little game will maybe help us choose exactly who will be sitting up here this evening. (Amantea and Guest 2024)

Amy starts her game by asking everyone interested in visually describing photographs to “opt-in” in any way that feels accessible to them, i.e., raising a hand or standing, for example. She then poses a

series of yes (stay in) or no (opt out) questions, such as: Do you notice the little things in life? And, Are you comfortable being vulnerable in public? These questions gradually narrow the group down to a few key candidates, whom Amy begins to engage with individually by asking questions like: What is your favourite season and why? Or, Cat or dog and why? These seemingly benign queries elicit conversation and allow for a better sense of the individuals, one of whom will eventually join Amy on stage.

We added this second round of conversation after a few small-audience shows to allow Amy more time to determine, via two or three minutes of chat, which of the remaining candidates might make for a suitable and engaging scene partner for the next fifty-five or so minutes. Amy's choice of partner was based on peoples' eagerness to speak, the thoughtfulness of their answers, and ultimately, a gut instinct about things a sighted person might use visual cues to determine. It is worth noting that almost all of her choices turned out to be exquisite partners in the piece, some so heartbreakingly honest they could have been intentionally cast.

Once on stage, and prior to any photos being shown, a series of small exchanges continue: Amy first offers her partner a choice of tea and tea cup (a selection of each having been brought from Vancouver); Amy pours the boiling water into a cup with the help (but no explanation) of a beeping liquid leveller; and then Amy poses a series of questions to get to know this guest, including a request for a diversity description specific to gender, race, and ability, for example.

A: How about if I were to ask you to describe to me what you look like?

J: Oh,

A: Yeah, I know. It's a thing, right? Because I'm missing the visual details. And, you know, you already told me that you're a white man.

J: Yeah.

A: I caught that earlier. And I thank you for that. Because those of us who are blind use a lot of audio description. Audio description has set up white and able bodied as the default. And I often live in a world where people are either othered by

description, or I look over diversity. And I'm made to make assumptions, and I don't like that. So, thank you for offering that. It helps me to position myself in conversation within space. But you didn't tell me about what the rest of you looks like. (Amantea and Guest 2024)

This invitation to speak visible and in some cases invisible identifiers—identifiers that could connect to various dynamics of power, privilege, and access—was originally inserted to offer Amy an opportunity to position herself (politically and socially) in relationship to her stage partner. Looking back on it, the act also opened up a reciprocating state of vulnerability on the part of the guest that, once combined with Amy's eventual inquiries into personal memory, deepened to establish a trust between host and guest. Amy builds on this trust as she moves through a sequence of photos for description: photos of natural and urban environments; a photo of Amy's childhood home that we use to reveal that Amy lost her sight in her early twenties; and a medical photo of the interior of Amy's eye that is displayed over three stages of close-up.



Figure 2. FOLDA Festival, Kingston, Ontario, 2022.
Photo by Jay Middaugh.

Image description: An image showing an audience member standing in front of a wide screen. The screen shows one of Amy's photos depicting a row of trees and a building behind them. The sun breaks through the tops of the trees. Amy stands to the left of the screen.

Throughout the performance, Amy asks the person on stage to list the objective elements in the frame before inviting them to offer subjective and even imaginary details individual to that person. These details might arise from associative—occasionally vulnerable—memories. They include imagining the smells or sounds that may have been present in the moment the image was captured, and speculations at what may be occurring just out of frame. This act of history building, exclusive and shared, and of finding personally compelling elements in the images continue through a collaborative deconstruction of the photograph: Amy participates from a place of ownership and memory, and the describer does so from a place of offer.

For the blind and low vision audience members, this deep description becomes an access point to the work—an access point that has been integral to the purpose and structure of the work. For Amy, eschewing the objective elements in favour of speculation and potential is the reason she cites for continuing her photography practice. She is not interested in the objects or subjects she captures in her photographs (Long 2023). Her primary pursuit is the curious, impermanent patterns of light that her eye picks up as she wanders. Her secondary pursuit is the associations generated by these random moments she captures in photographs. These connections might be her own—“the feeling of gravel under my feet” or “the memory of her mother being bundled up, because she’s always a bit cold” (Amantea and Guest 2024)—or, once in the performance, those of her conversation partner as they generate personal connections through the images in response to Amy’s questions. The conversations and experiences surrounding the photos are as critical as the photos themselves; they are “conversations you would not get to have with someone on the bus” (Amatea and Long 2024).

This roughly forty-minute familiarity-building exchange of information and histories culminates in Amy asking if the participant would like to see one of the photos Amy took of them earlier in the evening, first in its unedited form, and then treated live with a digital process (what we called a filter) designed to replicate Amy’s experience of sight. This moment is when we hoped the culminating impacts of conversation and trust building would pay off, as participants were asked to

personally engage with Amy’s experience of sight in a public arena. This part of the performance offers a direct encounter with an “other” and their ability.



Figure 3. Triptych of Amy becoming filtered.
Photo and editing by Nico Dicecco.

Image description: The image is a combination of three images side by side. Each image is a chest-up portrait of writer and performer Amy Amantea. The image on the left is an unedited photograph. The middle image is the same but has a filter that obscures portions of Amy’s face. The image on the right is the same photo again, but even more obscured, allowing only fragments of Amy’s face to be made out.

Exchange Number 2: Nico, Amy, and the Filter

We use the shorthand “filter” to describe the photo editing effect we developed for use inside the show. The filtering process transforms an unedited portrait photo of our participant into a creative approximation of what Amy sees with the 2 percent vision she has in one eye. *Filter* is, however, a misleading term in this case, potentially conjuring social media images that have been altered using contrast levels and hue gradients in the highlights and shadows, for example. *Filter* implies a preexisting editing tool that can be overlaid on top of an existing photo to instantly create the desired effect. In our case, the “Amy’s Lens Filter” requires Nico—or, as he is referred to in the piece, “our Ghost in the Machine” (Amantea and Guest, 2024)—to actively listen to the conversation happening on stage. Based on each unique performance,

he digitally alters the unedited portrait Amy took earlier to both obscure and highlight essential qualities of her guest. He then displays the image on a monitor on stage—all within fifteen to twenty minutes.

The various elements of this process came out of a set of conversations between Amy and Nico: Amy attempted to describe her experience of vision to Nico, and Nico attempted to create repeatable techniques that would approximate Amy's description as closely as possible. One key detail is that Amy has no central vision. It is not that Amy sees black in this macular region; rather there is a circle wherein she perceives nothing. Of course, it is not only difficult for a sighted person to understand this experience but also not possible to represent visual absence through visual content. Amy described other key aspects of her perceptual experience: High contrast and bold colour are easier to perceive than low contrast and muted colours, and facial details like eyes don't necessarily register, but eyeglasses often do. Amy also related that the "distortion" she experiences isn't exactly the fuzziness or blur a sighted person might expect, but related to the thousands of circular scars that have been surgically lasered into her retina.

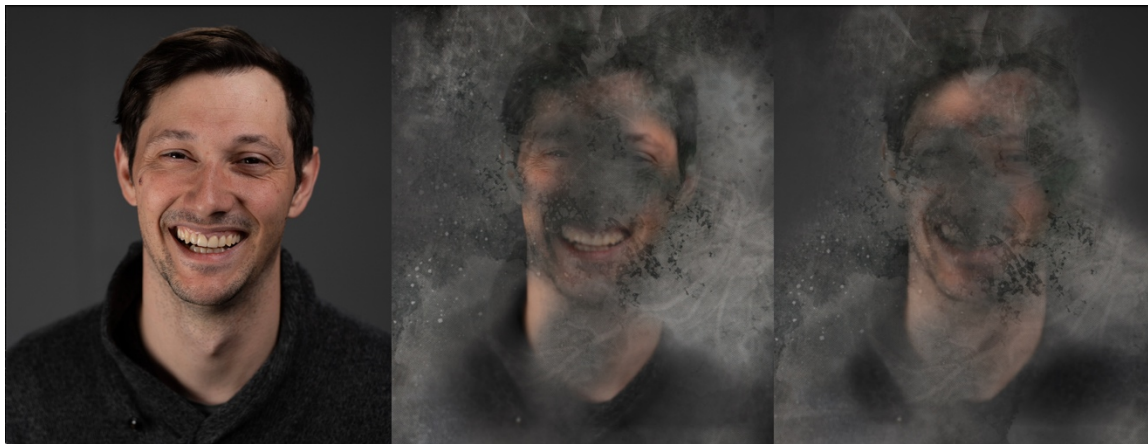


Figure 4. Triptych of Nico becoming filtered.
Photo and editing by Nico Dicecco.

Image description: The image is a combination of three images side by side. Each image is a chest-up portrait of media designer and operator Nico Dicecco. Nico is white, male, and in his thirties. He has a wide smile. The image on the left is an unedited photograph. The middle image is the same but has a filter that obscures portions of Nico's face. The image on the right is the same photo again, but even more obscured, allowing only fragments of Nico's face to be made out.

With all these elements (and more) in mind, the crucial detail that made the design of a simple filter an impossible goal was the reality that Amy's visual perception of a person is dynamic. While the centre of a static photo is always in the same place relative to its edges, Amy's vision moves to take in the whole person over a period of time. The details that emerge most notably are informed by the dynamics of her engagement with that person. Accordingly, the process that we developed requires Nico to be an engaged witness of the performance, listening for moments that might resonate with details in the portrait that Amy shoots. Even though Amy may not necessarily notice a person's smile when she first takes them in, if that person self-describes as someone who loves to laugh, Nico will likely showcase evidence of their smile in the filtered portrait. Nico tends to remove as much of the content from the centre of the photo as possible in a gesture toward representing Amy's lack of central vision; however, if the person is wearing a bold, high contrast colour and it happens to land centrally in the photo, he will feature that content in a gesture toward representing Amy's dynamic experience of perception. Regardless of the mechanics, or the inability to provide true representation of Amy's experience, the choices Nico makes in the final filtering process, including the scale at which he obscures the subject's face, has led to an ongoing conversation about the messaging and function of the piece.

Exchange Number 3: Tell Don't Show?

"OK, I'm gonna jump on edu-tainment for a moment" (Long in Amatea and Long 2024). "Edu-tainment" is a self-defined form of performance Amy often uses in her work as a disability consultant and advocate. Edu-tainment is a practice where the clarity of message is as important as keeping an audience engaged. It is also something Amy has recognized colouring her work as a storyteller and performer in past projects. For James, however, the concept of educating through art remains distinctly at odds with much of his practice as a contemporary performance maker. In his view, attempts at educating risk pandering and contradict the poetic abstraction critical for offering alternate experiences of the work. For him, attempts to educate rather than to immerse the audience in an experience, even if it means occasional

befuddlement, allow the audience to get too far ahead of what's occurring in front of them. Despite identifying his work as post-dramatic, James sees education as clashing with the traditional and widely accepted theatrical maxim of "show, don't tell."

"Everything I do is tell because I'm so often immersed in the group of people that don't see. So, I tell people everything" (Amantea and Long 2024). At the beginning of the work's development, particularly in its first iterations, Amy and James spent a fair amount of time debating the value of either position for the work. They discussed how traditional concepts of the abstract or didactic may have to shift considering the collaborators and intended audiences.

Through My Lens is a show about a visual form (photography) being described for a non-sighted individual. It was originally conceived by Amy as an access-expanding opportunity to allow blind and low vision audiences to experience her work in an inclusive theatrical setting. Telling, not showing, is intrinsic to the piece. The filtering action of *telling* is revealed through a dynamic exchange that renders the performance convention of merely *showing* a lonely, demonstrative enterprise. It is through this collaborative act of filtering through telling that Amy, as well as the audience, comes to know the person she has brought on stage.



Figure 5. Triptych of James becoming filtered.
Photo and editing by Nico Dicecco.

Image description (previous page): The image is a combination of three images side by side. Each image is a chest-up portrait of writer director James Long who is white and fifty years old. He is smiling and has messy hair. The image on the left is an unedited photograph. The middle image is the same but has a filter that obscures portions of James's face. The image on the right is the same photo again, but even more obscured, allowing only fragments of James's face to be made out.

It is also worth underling that, for Amy, another core value in creating the piece was to portray an empowered, independent, working, and yes, educating person who also happens to be blind. She wants audiences to return to their lives with a new perception of blindness—one that moves beyond stereotypes of people struggling on disability income and living less-than-full lives. *Through My Lens*, as much as it is a piece of relational, participatory performance, also aims to reduce the stigmatization of the disability community. But do dedicated attempts at reducing stigmas make for compelling self-performance?

Troubling the Self

Performing the self is a complex act, particularity in a work like *Through My Lens* where any character flaw risks being perceived through a lens of ability. So, why not focus on Amy's various capacities, in life and performance, rather than her gaps? Is this need to demonstrate the flaws of humanity just a theatrical trope imposing itself on a contemporary performance practice? This notion of working outside conventional theatrical norms remains an ongoing challenge for James and his equally present desire to create compelling and consequent actions that are widely accessible to audiences. For him, failure—or at minimum, the potential for it—keeps the viewer engaged as the performance continues. If we are going to ask audiences to sit for sixty-five or so minutes, do we not, as Claire Bishop (2012) insists in her many critiques of social practice, have some obligation to leave space for potential conflict rather than simply presenting well-controlled utopias on stage? Throughout the process, this negotiation was complicated. Amy wished to retain control over the sharing of her art and life, staying emotionally available but not overexposed, while James, in his hunt for tension, kept advocating for “stumbles”:

When you [Amy] are running a workshop, that's straightforward. You're performing authority. You know the answers, you know the structure of the day, and you can control the room. What I find most exciting in the show is when you lose control—when the other person starts moving in a direction you didn't expect. Then you have to catch up, and things go off the rails. (Long in Amantea and Long 2024)

In his study of performance and autoethnographies, scholar Craig Gingrich–Philbrook (2005) points to an inherent ontological conflict in self-performance: He notes how a body on stage telling its own story “troubles the conceptual boundary,” which normally exists between the act of writing and embodying personal narratives. This issue is only intensified in *Through My Lens* by the presence of James, collaborating director—one whom disability scholar Rosemarie Garland–Thomson (1997) would classify as a “normate,” with no obvious equity seeking position—pushing Amy toward flaw rather than virtuosity.

Through My Lens is Amy's story. It is promoted as hers and told by her as she navigates between improvised and set language. And yet, it exists within a dramaturgical structure and highly visual environment, co-developed by a team of two other core creators and various designers, all of whom are sighted. Should Amy have the final say in how the presented material develops and ultimately concludes? Or should she yield to James's inclination to extract some potentially diminishing “logic of pain” (Tuck and Yang 2014) that highlights a gap in her character and, by association, life? The conversation continued in the making of the work and comes to a demonstratively performative conclusion in the final exchange of the piece.

The Moment

Amy: What do you see?

G: It looks like a piece of art. . . It's what I would describe as a faded memory. Like remembering someone who you don't quite remember. Like someone you are losing your memory of.

Amy: How does that make you feel?

G: It makes me feel like a moment. Yeah, it makes me feel like a moment. Like a tiny slice. (Amantea and Guest 2024)



Figure 6. FOLDA Festival, Kingston, Ontario, 2022.
Photo by Jay Middaugh.

Image description: The image is of the back of participant Margaret Evans facing a filtered image of themselves on a monitor. Writer and Performer Amy Amantea sits to the left of the monitor.

The show culminates in a final exchange where Amy asks her onstage guest if they would like to see one of the portraits she took of them earlier. She invites them to pull their chair up to the monitor to view an image of themselves Nico has brought up. Amy asks what they see. The response is usually inflected with a bit of bashfulness and giggles at seeing their own image displayed so publicly. Amy asks how the photo makes them feel, and again, the individual is usually embarrassed, picking out flaws or marks of aging. Although, to be fair, there were a few folks genuinely quite happy with what they saw.

Amy then asks if they would like to see what her eye “sees.” She brings up an image that Nico has altered with the filter we discussed earlier, including bespoke adjustments to highlight unique individual features like their glasses and shirt colour, for example. Amy again asks the person what “they see.” With a lighter touch and clearer image of the individual’s face, their response is generally curious and positive. They may say that it looks “like a painting” or “a work of art” or, as above, “a

moment . . . a slice.” When the filter is more obscuring and the face is less visible, participants have been less positive and, on a few occasions, expressed a sadness in response to her query. The expression of sadness in this encounter is an immediate and emotional trigger for Amy who was never interested in offering up a pitiable version of her experience of the world. When hearing this tone, she often corrects any unflattering word choices rather than absorb them and continue on to what, to once again borrow from traditional narrative tropes, is the classically transformative moment in the work.

Following the reveal of the second image, regardless of how the individual responds or if Amy offers any small corrections, Amy asks the participant if they would like to know what it is she “gets” from their portrait. She then goes on to list a series of complex, human, and non-visual qualities that came up over their time together. These range from critical relationships the describer may have brought up, personality quirks, core memories, and so on—a rich portrait she has pieced together over their time together. This mini “reversal” is situated to demonstrate the breadth of perception possible beyond vision. It is a soft-touch action grounded in structure and, in some cases, resulting from what may have been perceived as a personal slight. It might even be a lesson baked into a narrative—a successful bit of edu-tainment.

Conclusion

This moment and the many that precede it continue to be pleasurable points of dialogue among the collaborators and audience members (sighted and non) with whom we consult after a showing. The technical, emotional, and dramaturgical choices we find ourselves negotiating as we move forward with the piece involve determining that “Goldilocks” spot for the filter—one that offers an abstract beauty but also elicits a bit of misgiving on the part of the participant. A climax perhaps? Or at minimum, a collaborative wondering that both respects Amy’s experience in life *and* creates the space for the revelation of the many modes of perception that sighted individuals may assume lacking in the lives of the blind or low sighted. We seek a learning, maybe even a teachable, moment that relies on the complexity inherent in offering access through exchange.

References

- Amantea, Amy, and Guest. 2024. *Through My Lens*. Ottawa. Audio.
- Amantea, Amy, and James Long. 2024. Post Show Conversation Discussion. *Through My Lens*. Audio.
- Bishop, Claire. 2012. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. Verso.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. 1997. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. Columbia University Press.
- Gingrich-Philbrook, Craig. 2005. "Autoethnography's Family Values: Easy Access to Compulsory Experiences." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 25 (4): 297–314.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10462930500362445>.
- Long, James, dir. 2023. *Through My Lens*. Video, Live Stream, Kingston, FOLDA Festival, Kingston, ON.
<https://vimeo.com/843681435?share=copy> (password protected).
- Tuck, Eve, and Wayne Yang. 2014. "R-Words: Refusing Research." In *Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry with Youth and Communities*, edited by Django Paris and Maisha T. Winn. Sage.