ALT TEXT-INSPIRED ZINES

Andy Slater: Paintings and Sculptures

Inspired by Andy Slater's *Invisible Ink* series and Alt Text as Poetry (a collaboration between artists Bojana Coklyat and Finnegan Shannon), this workshop explores the poetic ways Alt Text can be used to convey details of an artwork. Alt Text (short for alternative text) is used to describe essential details of an image to make visuals more accessible to blind and visually impaired audiences. Slater is a blind artist who relies on Alt Text descriptions to experience visual artworks. However, he has found that Alt Text often includes information that is not accessible to a blind person, such as the surface qualities of a painting. In response, Slater created *Invisible Ink*, a series of "paintings" that exist only as descriptions and focus almost entirely on subject matter and narrative. Through this work, Slater invites his audience to experience visual art as he does: through their imaginations.

Select a "painting" from Slater's *Invisible Ink* Series to listen to. Analyze the work using the following prompts.

- What imagery is evoked by the description?
- How does the artwork make you feel?
- Does the label information alter your understanding of the work?
- How did the experience of listening to the "painting" differ from viewing a painting?

Step 1: After spending time with Slater's work, select an image for which to write your own Alt Text description.

Select an artwork created by yourself or someone else, a photograph on your phone, or an image found online. Alternatively, you can choose to focus on a memory, a dream, or another mental image.

Step 2: Write Alt Text for your chosen image.

Alt Text descriptions are typically 1-2 sentences long. Longer descriptions may offer more detail and narrative, enhancing the user's experience. Consider the following suggestions for writing based on the *Cooper Hewitt Guidelines for Image Descriptions*:

- Clearly describe the subject matter.
- Identify key details, such as the materials and size of elements in the image.
- Describe the arrangement of elements in the image.
- When describing human figures, include details like age (baby, child, young adult, adult), presented gender, skin tone (light, medium-light, medium, medium-dark, dark), or other recognizable traits.

Step 3: Translate your Alt Text description into poetry.

Experiment with writing your Alt Text as a haiku, acrostic, a limerick, or a free-verse poem. Consider including:

- sensory details to enhance the description, such as touch, scent, sound, and taste.
- language that invites the audience to "feel" the environment portrayed or the posture of a depicted figure.
- line breaks and spacing to create rhythm and flow.
- repetition to emphasize details in the image.

Step 4: Fold a piece of 8.5 x 11-inch paper following the zine tutorial instructions.

Step 5: Create your zine.

A. Include your original Alt Text description and at least one of your poems.

B. Consider how the text will be arranged within the pages of your zine.
   - Will each description be contained to a single page or flow onto multiple pages? How do these choices alter how the text is read?
   - Consider how empty spaces could be used to represent pauses or breaths.
   - Experiment with font styles and sizes to emphasize words or phrases.

C. *Optional: Record yourself reading your zine or create a text-to-MP3 file using an app such as Voicemaker. Upload the file to a QR code generator for MP3 files. Add the QR code to your zine for greater accessibility.

A.

B.

C.
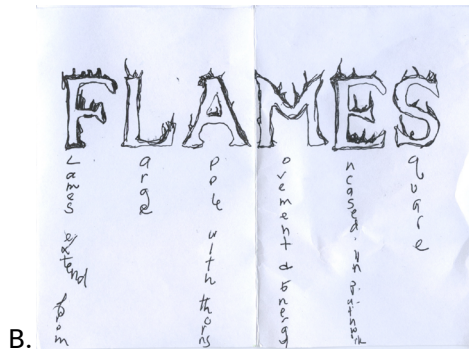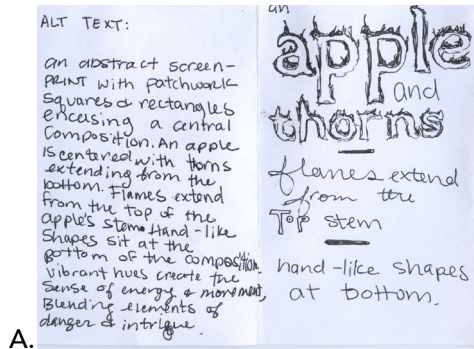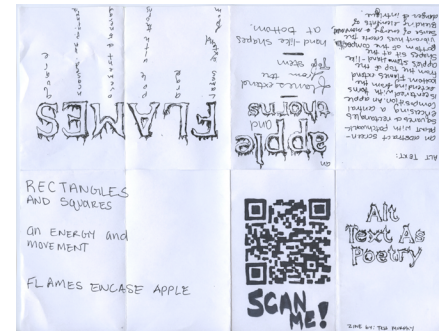
Step 6: Share and reflect.

- With a partner, discuss your experience writing the Alt Text and poetic rendition(s). How does each iteration alter the mental image created when reading/hearing the text?

Step 7: Photograph your work and share it with us on Instagram by tagging us at @universitygalleriesisu.

Artist biography:

Andy Slater (b. 1975, Milford, Connecticut) is a blind Chicago-based media artist, writer, performer, and disability advocate/"loudmouth." Slater holds a Masters in Sound Arts and Industries from Northwestern University and a B.F.A. from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He is a 2024 3Arts Next Level Awardee, 2022-2023 Leonardo Crip Tech Incubator fellow, 2022 United States Artists fellow, and 2018 3Arts/Bodies of Work fellow. The founder of the Society of Visually Impaired Sound Artists and the director of the *Sound as Sight* accessible field-recording project, Slater has exhibited and performed at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco, California; Transmediale Festival, Berlin, Germany; Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne, Australia; Critical Distance, Toronto, Canada; Experimental Sound Studios, Chicago, Illinois; the Art Institute of Chicago; Flux Factory, New York, New York; and the Momenta Dance Company, Oak Park, Illinois.

Selections from the press release:

Andy Slater: Paintings and Sculptures features Chicago-based artist Andy Slater's sound works and three-dimensional objects that mimic the presentation and appearance of traditional artistic formats but engage senses other than vision. Meant to be touched or heard rather than seen, these "paintings and sculptures" trouble the ocularcentrism that is at the core of the "visual" arts. For Slater, who is blind, this is more than just a conceptual gesture or a political statement (though it is those things, too): it is an attempt to invite people to have artistic experiences that are analogous to his own.