

Necessary Confusion

Making Queer-Crip Access

Project Title | Necessary Confusion: Making Queer-Crip Access

Project Management | Jo O'Brien

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Supervisors | Annette Krauss (present); Ruth Anderwald and Leonhard Grond (past)

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The covid-19 pandemic caused millions of people to begin thinking about disability for the first time. Able-bodied people were confronted with sickness, disability, and death in way that is usually reserved only for the already-unwell. The “uncertain times” of the early pandemic forced a global reckoning with our understanding of health and sickness. The new attention to disability that resulted from covid-19’s onset coincided with a rise in the visibility of neurodivergent conditions such as autism and ADHD (Abelnour, 2022; Russell, 2021). Collectively, this forced institutions to conduct much-needed reassessments of how they approached disability and accessibility. Often these reassessments drew on the work of disability studies scholars and activists. Disability has been theorised through many different models, with the most prevalent models focusing on accommodations-based approaches to accessibility (Behrgrs, et.al., 2016). Accommodations-based approaches make alterations to existing policies or structures, but often require a formal medical diagnosis. This is the approach that most universities and other institutions use, but it is critiqued as one of the more inaccessible and confusing approaches (Ho, et.al., 2020). More recently critical disability scholars have argued for an access-based approach to accessibility. Rather than accommodating after the fact, this model seeks to make access a foundational consideration to any framework (Papalia, 2020; Smilges, 2023). While this approach gives more agency to the disabled subject, neither it nor any prior model addresses the pervasiveness of confusion present in any attempt to negotiate accessibility. There can be confusion about the validity of one’s needs, confusion from institutions that misunderstand accessibility, and confusion from attempting to quantify disability. However, despite its centrality in any attempt to address accessibility, confusion remains an understudied topic.

Existing scholarship on confusion is minimal and spread over a variety of disciplines. Pedagogy and psychology understand confusion as an emotional response to the limits of understanding (Vogl, et.al., 2020; Vazard and Audrin, 2022; Arguel, et.al., 2019); medicine sees confusion as a symptom (Rasin, 1990; Zorembo, 2019); and media and communication studies examine confusion in relation to propaganda and other forms of social control (Bennett 1990; Woodward, 2014). Across all these disciplines the aim is always to resolve confusion or to work towards its resolution. Even fields which would seem predisposed to a critical consideration of confusion, such as queer theory and crip theory, have generally neglected it. Queer theory most commonly discusses confusion when critiquing the depiction of queers as “confused” subjects who need to be set “straight” (Flynn, 2021; Stewart, 2022; Stanley, 2021). Even those who explore confusion as it relates to the disruptive potential of queer/trans bodies still tend to treat it as an incidental phenomenon (Butler 1990, Love 2009, Bey 2022). Crip theory, which combines disability studies and queer theory, attends to some of the constitutive aspects of confusion. Crip theorists have examined the all-encompassing affectivity of “brain fog” and the need for more expansive understandings of time (Kafer, 2013; Chen, 2014). While, these efforts do offer valuable insights, their explorations of confusion itself are usually infrequent and limited in scope.

My research offers a critical examination of confusion and its relationship to access. The disciplines that do currently consider confusion tend to seriously undertheorize it,

seeing it only as a problem to be resolved. At the same time, those fields which could develop a critical consideration of confusion and its relationship to access have not yet done so. This has resulted in both a lack of language with which to approach confusion and uncertainty about what a critical understanding of confusion could offer. *Necessary Confusion* addresses these gaps in scholarship through two interrelated questions. Existing language for confusion limits our capacity for engaging with confusion, constraining it to a negative, self-reinforcing affect. In order to capacitate confusion otherwise, my project looks beyond the existing language for confusion and asks: *what types of extra-verbal, aesthetic, or collaborative forms of language are needed to develop non-resolution-oriented approaches to confusion?* In seeking out forms of language that can hold the messiness of remaining unresolved, I draw on established concepts that argue for the right to be unknown and the liberating potential of failure as intentional response (Glissant, 2010; Halberstam, 2011). My current work on this question includes approaches based in performance, video, and text. Across these aesthetic and extra-verbal forms of language, slowness, indeterminacy, vignetting, and looping have emerged as some of the constitutive components of a non-resolution-oriented approach to confusion.

Necessary Confusion also addresses the uncertainty about confusion that stems from its limited critical consideration. The initial outcomes from work on the above question form the basis of how I address the project's second question: *how might an approach grounded in expansive forms of language draw on queer and crip theory to produce confusion as a framework for access-oriented practices?* I map the components of non-resolution-oriented approaches to confusion onto my practice as a facilitator, instructor, and collaborator. Some of these components guide how I develop or co-develop specific strategies in workshops or courses (slowness, looping), and others help to shape broader approaches to facilitating and collaborating (indeterminacy, vignetting). The ways in which I frame and integrate these components into my practice also draws on the work of abolitionist teachers, community organizers, and activist-scholars (Inoue, 2019; Krauss, 2025; brown, 2017; Cornish, et.al., 2023).

In thinking of confusion as a problem to be resolved there is an unspoked presumption that it can – or should – be resolved. Many who traverse the world in confusing bodies, navigate inaccessible accommodations procedures, or chronically experience confusion know that this presumption is untrue. Confusion will always remain. Acknowledging this means also acknowledging that an under-consideration of confusion is an impediment to access. To work towards more accessible futures, we need to look critically at confusion—not to resolve it—but to understand what confusion offers.

Project Activities (selected)

Publications

Shon, Sue and **Jo O'Brien**. "Connective Tissues: Notes on Jan Wade, Soul Power, and Art_work." *Liquid Blackness*, Vol 10, Issue 1 (forthcoming, 2026).
O'Brien, Jo. "Resistance Without Protest." In *The Arts of Resistance*, edited by Ruth Anderwald and Leonhard Grond. (Forthcoming, 2025).

- O'Brien, Jo and Sunny Nestler. "What We Need To Be Here: Conversations About Access and Prioritising People." *Makings Journal* 5, no.1. (2024).
- O'Brien, Jo. "Hard to Make Out." *On Dizziness*, edited by Ruth Anderwald and Leonhard Grond, 6 Aug, 2024.
- O'Brien, Jo. "Legibility." in *Art Research Envelope* 6, no.1 (2024): 21-22.

Creative Work

- O'Brien, Jo, and Sue Shon. *Art_work: Attending to art's alternate histories*. Workshop at Zentrum Fokus Forschung, Vienna, Austria, July 29, 2025.
- O'Brien, Jo. *It Needs Doing – A Writing Workshop*. Workshop series at University of Applied Arts Vienna, Vienna, Austria, June 23-August1, 2025.
- O'Brien, Jo and Ema Benčíková. *Dear Future: A workshop and conversation about next year*. Workshop at Villa Vida, Vienna, Austria, June 12, 2025.
- O'Brien, Jo (dir.). *A Place Out of Time*. With Conny Dextl and Hanna Donald. Performance at in a bed way, Theater Neumarkt, Zurich, Switzerland, May 30-31, 2025.
- Huurdemann, Emily, **Jo O'Brien**, Peter Thomas, and Ana Cristina Panseira de Araujo. *Essaying as a way of de-skilling*. Performance at METHOD/ART, Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Antwerp, Belgium, April 1, 2025.
- O'Brien, Jo. *Legibility*. Exhibited as part of Open House 24: Sea Grapes, Zentrum Fokus Forschung, Vienna, Austria, November 5, 2024.
- O'Brien, Jo. *Sustainable Resistance: Slow Beginnings for Durational Action*. Workshop at The Arts of Resistance, Vienna, Austria, August 26, 2024.

Conferences/Lectures

- O'Brien, Jo and Simone Stergioula. "GenderFail: Independent Publishers as Resistance to Anti-Gender Narratives." Lecture at Art - Research - Gender Lecture Series. University of Applied Arts Vienna, Vienna, Austria, (forthcoming January 14, 2026).
- O'Brien, Jo. "Necessary Confusion: Making Queer-Crip Access." Paper presented at Theory and Practice in Artistic Research: Searching, Knowing, and Making in the Age of Light, Zentrum Fokus Forschung, Vienna, AT, May 15, 2025.
- Huurdean, Emily, Ana Cristina Panseira de Araujo, **Jo O'Brien**, and Peter Thomas. "Essay and Pedagogy" Collaborative lecture presented at 16th SAR International Conference on Artistic Research, University of Porto, Porto, Portugal, May 7, 2025.
- O'Brien, Jo, Simone Stergioula, and Ksenia Yurkova. "Art and Justice: Making Justice Beyond the Juridical." Panel organized at Territories of Art, Film and TV School of Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, Prague, Czechia, November 1, 2024.
- O'Brien, Jo. "Confusion as Gesture: Exploring confusion's disruptive potential in the managed university." Paper presented at Midlands Conference for Critical Thought, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK, April 6, 2024.

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