

# Mousse Magazine

ESSAYS Mousse 68

## Critical Creative Corrective Cacophonous Comical: Closed Captions

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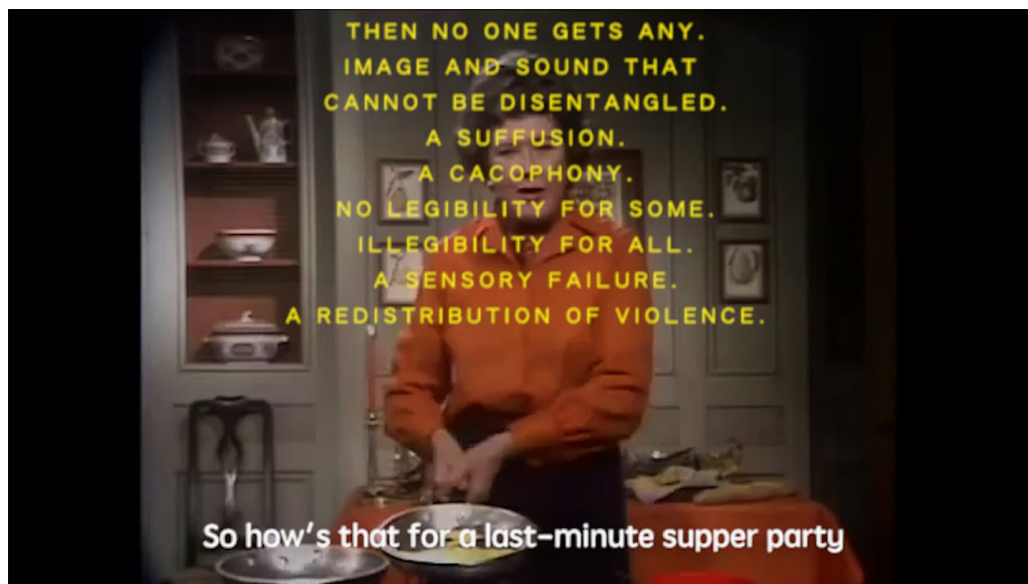
by Emily Watlington

This essay highlights works of video art that critically and creatively engage the closed caption. These works toy with the caption's limited capacity to translate, the importance of providing access, and present the caption as a generative site for poetic, humorous, and critical perspectives. The author presents video art as an important site for experimenting with new forms of so-called "audiovisual media" that do not presume sighted and hearing audiences and do not treat access as an afterthought that can be turned on and off.

"THEN NO ONE GETS ANY," reads a voice in Carolyn Lazard's video *A Recipe for Disaster* (2018). "IMAGE AND SOUND THAT CANNOT BE DISENTANGLED." The voice is speaking over Julia Child's; she's teaching us how to cook an omelet on her 1960s television show *The French Chef*. "A SUFFUSION. A CACOPHONY." The text is printed in yellow, laid over footage of Child cooking in a bright kitchen. The text scrolls up slowly. "NO LEGIBILITY FOR SOME. ILLEGIBILITY FOR ALL." Pauses in Child's monologue are filled with another voice that describes what's on-screen: Child rotates the pan, adds a garnish. Sometimes the two voices overlap. "A SENSORY FAILURE. A REDISTRIBUTION OF VIOLENCE."

"WHAT IS PERFORMED IS WHAT IS DESCRIBED. WHAT IS SEEN IS WHAT IS HEARD. WHAT IS HAPPENING IS WHAT IS NARRATED... THIS IS A WHITE WOMAN WHO COOKS WHILE TALKING ABOUT HOW TO COOK. WHAT YOU HEAR, IS WHAT YOU GET. AND WHAT YOU GET, IS WHAT YOU HEAR. A REDUNDANCY FOR SOME. A CLARITY FOR OTHERS." At the bottom of the screen, all dialogue and sounds are described: "[a pan scratching the stovetop]." These are closed captions (sort of). They're not subtitles; those transcribe dialogue only, not sounds like scratches. Closed captions are

usually used to render audio content accessible to deaf/Deaf audiences.<sup>1</sup> Technically, Lazard's are open captions, because they cannot be turned off (closed captions can be). In *A Recipe for Disaster*, captions are not add-ons that render the video accessible after the fact. "NO MORE INTERVENTIONS AS THE CONDITION OF ACCESS. A WORK MADE FROM THE CONDITIONS OF DEBILITY OR DIFFERENCE, NOT TRANSLATED FOR DEBILITY OR DIFFERENCE. SOMETHING MADE FROM SCRATCH." Instead, captions and visual descriptions are the fabric of the work, a site for criticality and creativity, not only a corrective. But, of course, Lazard is actually retrofitting Julia Child's cooking show.<sup>2</sup> Their remix shows both the importance and the limits of captioning sounds and describing images on media not made with deaf/Deaf and/or blind and low-vision audiences in mind from the start. Image descriptions are usually forced to fit in the seconds between spoken dialogue, for instance. Inevitably, either content is reduced, or voices overlap, producing a cacophony.



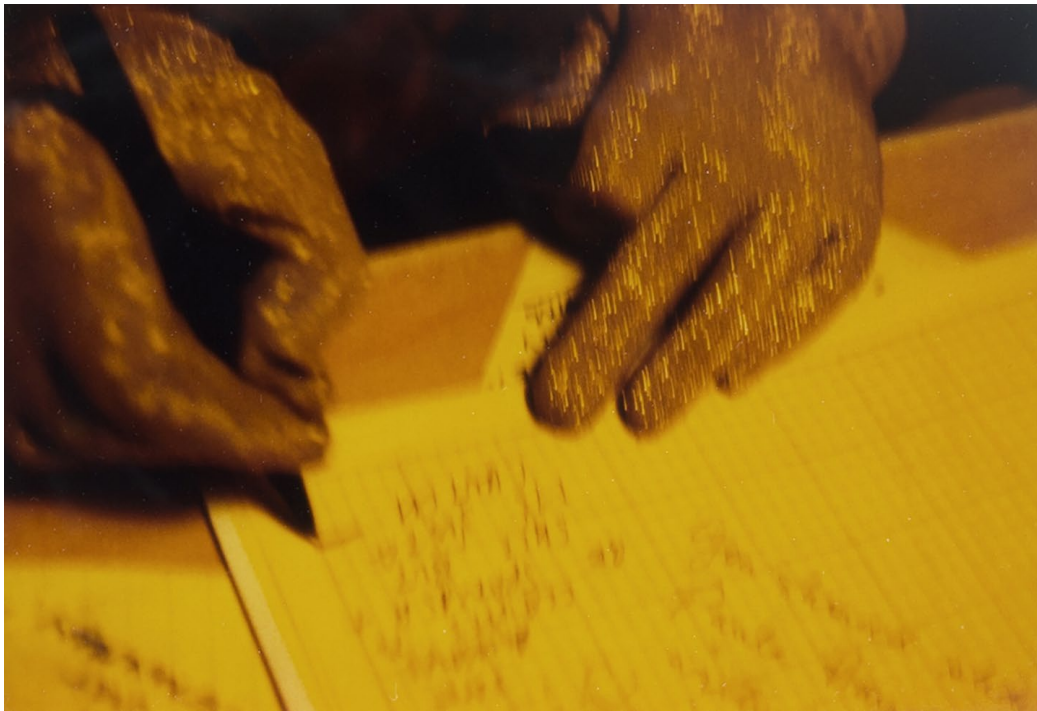
Carolyn Lazard, *A Recipe for Disaster* (still), 2018. Courtesy: the artist  
[Image description: Julia Child is holding a pan with two hands and making an omelet. Layered on top of this image is yellow text that reads: "THEN NO ONE GETS ANY./IMAGE AND SOUND THAT/CANNOT BE DISENTANGLED./A SUFFUSION./A CACOPHANY./NO LEGIBILITY FOR SOME./ILLEGIBILITY FOR ALL./A SENSORY FAILURE./A REDISTRIBUTION OF VIOLENCE." At the bottom of the image, where captions would appear, a white text reads: So how's that for a last-minute supper party."]

Lazard retrofitted Child's show, in particular, because this chef was already moving toward working accessibility into the fabric of her cooking show: she describes a lot of what she's doing, not in order to be considerate of blind and low-vision audiences necessarily, but under another rubric of access. Child was trying to bring French cooking to the masses; it's a didactic show. *The French Chef* (1962-1973) probably didn't have closed captions when it aired in the 1960s, but the Americans with Disabilities Act has, since 1993, required built-in automatic closed-caption decoders on all televisions thirteen inches or larger in the U.S., where both Lazard and Child made their media. Since 2012, nonautomated closed captions and visual descriptions have been regulated by the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) for Netflix, television broadcasters, and movie theaters too. "As accessible offerings increase," writes Georgina Kleege in her book *More Than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art*, "it seems an apt moment to review the history of audio description

and scrutinize current standards and practices.”<sup>3</sup> A Recipe for Disaster and a number of other recent artist projects are doing precisely that.

Artists Christine Sun Kim and Joseph Grigely, for instance, have highlighted the countless errors, poetry, humor, and subjectivity latent in automatically and human-generated closed captions. As Kim has put it, “The multidimensionality of sound, or many layered sounds, are often reduced to brief captions.”<sup>4</sup> She sampled some reductive captions, such as “(POEMING)” or “(VOICE BREAKING)” in her performance *Spoken on My Behalf* (2019). The work comprised a performance and three-channel video with white text on a black background, and it concerned Kim’s experiences of having others speak for her. She performed live, signing and gesturing, while recordings of voices who’ve spoken for her regularly (her mother, her partner) played occasionally. One channel sampled closed captions from TV shows: Kim compared the ways in which having others speaking on her behalf in a language that’s not her first can, like captions, be reductive. The sampled captions illustrate her point, reading reductive, hilarious, and perplexing things like “(BURNING QUESTION),” “(SOUND OF CONFUSED DEAF WOMAN),” “(INFLECTING BRIGHTLY),” “(OATMEAL MEOWS).”

For his in-progress series *Craptions* (ongoing), artist Joseph Grigely has been sampling a number of suspect captions as well. The series is made of printed screenshots also sampled from watching movies and television. Grigely’s sarcastic title implies a sense of frustration with the limits of reductive captions and with the treatment of closed captions as mere afterthoughts. At the same time, its lighthearted and humorous tone posits the closed caption as a site for humor and for generative, new perspectives on a work of media.



Joseph Grigely, *Jenny S.*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 7 December 1995 (still), 1996. © Marc Domage.  
Courtesy: Air de Paris, Paris

[Image description: Close-up of two hands wearing sparkly gloves. One is writing and the other is holding the paper; scribbled notes illegible. Yellow light cast over image.]

In her piece *Close Readings* (2016), Kim pushed the humor, absurdity, and poetry that's often produced from this process of reduction even further. She sampled a range of movie clips concerned with the voice—literally and as a metaphor for agency, empowerment, and self-representation—from *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), and more. Then, she invited four deaf/Deaf friends to caption them according to what they felt important to describe. Some captioners and viewers might prefer to have every sound described, while others might privilege those overtly related to the narrative (though this, too, is subjective). The resulting four videos were presented side by side as a four-channel installation, inviting viewers to compare them and revealing the subjectivity inherent in the process. The captions made by and for deaf/Deaf people included more typical descriptions, as well as ones like “(the sound of a light that never flickers)” or “(sound of voice being extracted)”: sounds I'm not sure I've ever heard and certainly can't conjure from their descriptions.



Christine Sun Kim, *Close Readings* (still), 2015. Captioners: Jeffrey Mansfield. Courtesy: the artist  
[Image description: Still of *The Little Mermaid*, a close-up of Ariel smiling (long red hair, white woman, red lips, mermaid). The top two-thirds are blurred. A caption reads “(sound of falling in love).”]

Kleege has critiqued the ways in which the subjectivity inherent in providing closed captions or visual descriptions can reflect biases. For instance, only recently did it become standard to visually describe the race of every character in a movie. Previously, it was up to the describer to determine whether or not a character's race explicitly bore on the plot. Nonwhite people were more likely to have their races identified, which reinforced whiteness as the default. Kleege also critiques requirements that visual descriptions always be “objective,” expressing frustration with a tendency to focus only on the plot and not on aesthetic experiences. She notes that visual descriptions often derive from “problematic assumptions about what blind people can understand and should know about visual phenomena,” and also notes that blind and low-vision people have a wide range of, for instance, education in art history, though they are usually assumed to have none at all.<sup>5</sup> Kim's *Close Readings* demonstrates clearly that objective closed-captioning is not possible, and while basic standards can be fruitful, both she and Kleege seem to agree that objective or uniform descriptions are hardly desirable anyway. Kim figures describing and

captioning as an art form itself: after all, we credit those who translate literary works from one language to another as interpreters. Why not do the same when translating from sound to text, or from image to words?

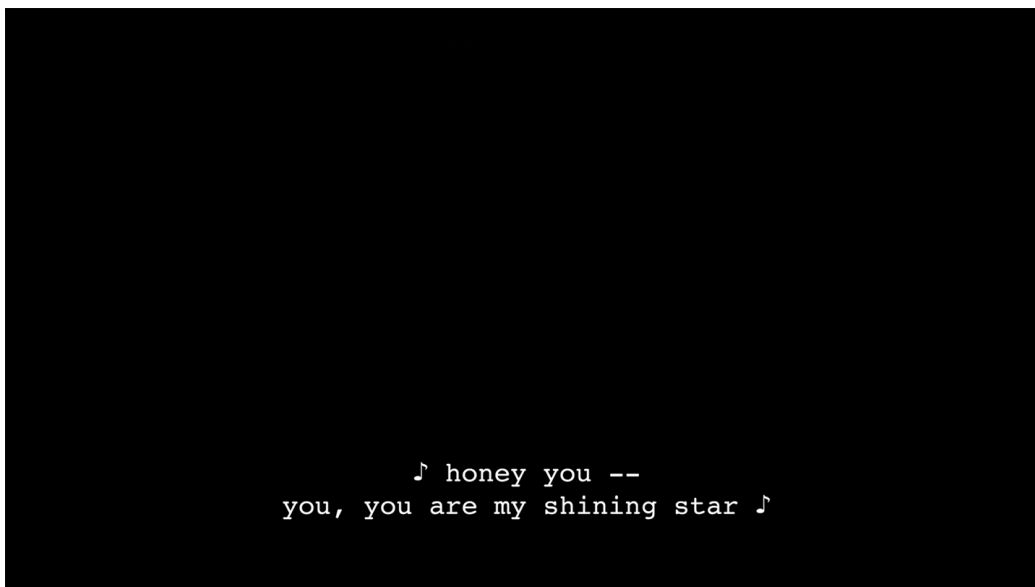
Artist Liza Sylvestre's *Captioned* series (2017-2018) considers what would happen if accuracy and objectivity were thrown out the window entirely. For *Captioned-Channel Surfing* (2017), she captioned her experience channel surfing without captions on, relying only on the visual information accessible to her: context clues, body language, and lip reading (at least, when the actors' mouths face the camera). "It is impossible to read cartoon lips," one caption reads. As a cartoon boy leads a princess down a path, Sylvestre sarcastically comments, "*He* leads the way, of course." Certainly, Sylvestre's interpretation is as (if not more) entertaining and enlightening as the original clips she samples; her interpretation is as valid as any "objective" captioning. There's a sense that one would not be missing much if they couldn't experience yet another patriarchal hetero love story. Yet at the same time, Sylvestre also makes note of the ways in which movies and television often serve as crucial common cultural references: reflections of a *zeitgeist* or topics of dinner-party conversations. "I'm left wondering how to make connections when I don't share the same content," reads one caption as the artist recounts her discomfort with making small talk. It's true that many people elect to opt out of mass media out of boredom, busyness, or a countercultural affinity, that not all of us have a desire to keep up with the Kardashians. Yet, of course, many people do, and forcing this exclusion is simply unfair. Sylvestre's video interventions thwart any notion that television and movies are so precious and wonderful they cannot be rethought in order to be more accommodating at the level of both form and narrative. "NOT AN ACCOMMODATION, WHERE WE HAVE TO BE GRATEFUL FOR GETTING TO JOIN THE PARTY"—that's Lazard's video again. "WELL YOUR PARTY SUCKS."



Liza Sylvestre, *Captioned-Channel Surfing* (still), 2016. Courtesy: the artist  
[Image description: Movie still, close-up of a white man and woman wearing summer clothes in a rural setting looking excited in a phone booth. A caption reads "They are so young and excited and happy."]

Sylvestre, Grigely, Lazard, and Kim critique, with humor and sarcasm, the limits of the closed caption: it's reductive, an add-on, never objective, prone to errors, and it creates cacophonies when it means to render legible. But, of course, all of this is preferred to no closed captions at all. Still, we cannot conceive of them as a corrective, as having solved a problem: instead, closed captions are figured as sites for poetry and criticism. Lazard asks how access might be folded into the very fabric of audiovisual media, calling for "A MEDIA OF MEDIAS. A NEW MATERIALISM. A WAY OF MAKING AND CONSUMING THAT REFUSES TRANSLATION, THAT WE DO NOT UNDERSTAND, THAT WE CANNOT IMAGINE, BECAUSE WE HAVE NOT CREATED THE CONDITIONS FOR ITS PRODUCTION. THE POSSIBILITY FOR AN INTEGRATED AUDIENCE." A media that doesn't have to be mediated.

*April 4, 1980* (2018) by Constantina Zavitsanos and Amalle Dublon pushes toward this new kind of media. It's actually Zavitsanos's voice reading the manifesto in Lazard's video, and they, with Dublon, offer a proposal for fulfilling its demands. The piece has no image (instead, a black rectangle): the artists describe the materials of the work as "open captions, closed image, sound." *April 4, 1980* privileges those accessing the work via closed captions rather than audio: for instance, the audio speed is slowed; caption reading is primary. There are no characters on-screen to match dialogue with, and no image that needs to be described. The resulting audio track sounds a bit broken, though this brokenness bears no obvious relation to the narrative. It also challenges what it means to work right or sound right: it gets the message across, after all. For once, hearing viewers are put into a rare experience of watching a piece not made to privilege them. "A MEDIA SLOW ENOUGH FOR EVERYONE TO FOLLOW. A MEDIA QUICK ENOUGH FOR EVERYONE TO GET LOST... TOGETHER," reads Zavitsanos's voice in Lazard's video. The lack of image also addresses the problem of having to fit visual descriptions within pauses between dialogue, conforming to the speed of the original, which privileges sighted and hearing audiences.



Constantina Zavitsanos and Amalle Dublon, *April 4, 1980* (still), 2018. Courtesy: the artists  
[Image description: A video still; two lines of song lyrics appear in white captioning on a black background. They read, "honey you — you, you are my shining star"]

Joseph Grigely actually made a work in the late 1990s in a similar vein: it's an episode of the TV series *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996-2005) with the image and sound turned off, leaving audiences with only the captions. But he never showed it: critics and curators were not interested at the time.<sup>6</sup> It was the days before YouTube and Vimeo, where many of the other videos mentioned in this essay live, and Grigely's piece still exists today only on Beta tape. Work by marginalized artists is often passively erased when it is not actively preserved, especially in the case of audiovisual works, which need to be constantly updated to new formats in order to remain playable. "The visual description isn't creating access to something that separately exists," wrote Dublon. "Access is the material and form of the artwork."<sup>7</sup> She was referring to Park McArthur's *PARA-SITES* (2018), the audio guide that comprised the majority of McArthur's recent MoMA exhibition. The observation can be applied to all the videos in this essay.

In their book *The Biopolitics of Disability: Neoliberalism, Ablenationalism, and Peripheral Embodiments*, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder note that "disability subjectivities are not just characterized by socially imposed restrictions, but, in fact, productively create new forms of embodied knowledge and collective consciousness."<sup>8</sup> They note that much of disability studies has, until recently, focused so much on the removal of disabling barriers—by adding, for instance, closed captions or image descriptions—that "the active transformation of life that the alternative corporealities of disability creatively entail" is often neglected.<sup>9</sup> Like Lazard, they critique the ways in which neoliberal inclusionism is supposed to make disabled people feel grateful for getting to join the party, rather than challenging the notion of what counts as celebration and asking that we rethink the kind of party that had exclusion built into it from the start. The critical and experimental approach of artist projects offers a crucial way to imagine a future for audiovisual media—a term with hearing and seeing built into its name.

[1] Some prefer to capitalize "Deaf" to denote a cultural group with their own language.

[2] I use the term "retrofit" here the way it's often used in architecture. To retrofit is to bring a building up to code, often ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) code, when the building was built before those laws were in place.

[3] Georgina Kleege, *More Than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 97.

[4] Christine Sun Kim, "Close Readings," accessed May 1, 2019, <http://christinesunkim.com/work/close-readings/>.

[5] Kleege, *More Than Meets the Eye*, 98.

[6] Joseph Grigely, email to the author, April 28, 2019.

[7] Amalle Dublon, in "Dependency and Improvisation: A Conversation with Park McArthur," *Art Papers* 42.04 (Winter 2019): 52.

[8] David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *The Biopolitics of Disability: Neoliberalism, Ablenationalism, and Peripheral Embodiments* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 2.

[9] Mitchell and Snyder, 1.

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