

Access Report: IOTA

IOTA Institute is a creative agency located in Halifax that offers a myriad of art sector services with a focus on working with artists and supporting artistic livelihoods. Their work spans art management and consultation, public art project management, grant and proposal writing, curatorial research, and workshops and facilitation. Their primary areas of focus are in new media, visual, interactive and performance art and the web. They build relationships and partner with artists, government, corporations and grass-roots organizers (Services) and connect with their clients and the public through a multiplicity of sites including online, pop-up galleries, events and art fairs. Through their artist management services, they engage in intersectional advocacy for “artists facing institutional barriers, including 2SLGBTQQIPA+, Black, Indigenous, POC, Women, Neurodiverse, d/Deaf and Disabled artists arts professionals” (Services) and develop opportunities. IOTA’s Studio Gallery sells work created by the artists they represent and broader collaborators through an online art shop, pop-up events, art fairs, and their online artist’s market. Through their public art projects they work with artists and with clients seeking public art. Their recent project called InterCHANGE partners with the Halifax Regional Municipality to program temporary public artworks within the redeveloped Cogswell District with a focus on providing “professional public art opportunities prioritized to Mi’kmaw and African Nova Scotian artists” (Call to artists: InterCHANGE). IOTA is a small team.

IOTA’s current approach to access, as articulated in their Mandate and Services (website) includes the following keywords, concepts and phrases:

- *Shifting art from traditional power structures*

- *Intersectionality*
- *Artist-centered*
- *Commitment to bringing to the foreground first voice art narratives, including 2SLGBTQQIPA+, Indigenous, Women, and Neurodiverse arts professionals*
- *Commitment to better partnerships with the representation of Black, POC and Disabled artists*

IOTA does not have an access policy or document that describes their overarching access initiatives and commitments. At this time, they have multiple templates for different contexts. Since 2020, IOTA has been working with an access process called a Values Document. They use this process when starting an ongoing working relationship with an artist to document individual access needs and whether an artist self-identifies as neurodivergent or disabled. Due to the context in which they most often work with artists, IOTA engages with access creation on an individually-tailored basis. IOTA has noted a need to develop internal access practice around access tensions that arise between artists' and staffs' access needs, especially evident during multi-artist collaborations. As a small organization working in vastly different contexts (i.e. one-on-one with artists, curation, working with cities, art fairs) and without an articulated approach to access, access has been implemented differently across projects resulting in inconsistency and revealing access tensions.

Access Practices, Tensions and Gaps at IOTA

Working With Artists: Access Practices

- Value Documents (access documents) are created for each artists' onboarding which includes information such as preferred method(s) of communication (ie, daily phone check-ins), technology use, access needs and whether they self-identify as neurodivergent or disabled. These documents are always in process and built with the artist.
- Flexible meeting times.
- Neurodivergent-aware timelines.
- Prioritizing access needs over projects with extremely short timelines because access could not be delivered in a sustainable way.
- Thinking critically and interpersonally about triggering language and safer language in communications while working on projects with artists.
- Advocating for and affirming language preferences for artists when working with galleries (i.e. when an artist expresses dislike for a certain way of being described this is noted and communicated to galleries for example).
- Welcoming feedback from artists on an ongoing basis.
- Tailored budget templates for projects to support accessibility.
- Breaking down projects into manageable parts.
- Shifting methods of coordination and categorization according to the artist's preferences.

- Sliding scale services based on the scope of projects and client needs.

Working With Artists: Access Tensions and Gaps

- Prioritizing artists' access needs can sometimes conflict with staff members' access needs.
- Timelines and deadlines can be difficult at times in relation to access and especially when externally implemented.
- As a small organisation it can be difficult to say no to projects with demanding deadlines even when they conflict with access needs and put staff in a position of working in an unsustainable way to accommodate the artist and project.
- Keeping communications with artists within working hours can be difficult to communicate and maintain a boundary for.
- Art sector pressure to “push through” rather than working in a sustainable way and pace.

Public Art: Access Practices

- Currently creating an audio guide, written guide and visual guide to be launched for the InterCHANGE project. Launching October 15, 2025. Audio descriptions and conceptual basis of the work described and created by the artists.
- Use of QR codes for IOTA managed projects and when possible on other projects.

- IOTA has hosted ticketed events for community members to more intimately experience public art that pertains to their communities or identity(ies) in an intentional way.
- Use of plain language and word economy in IOTA's public art calls. Embedded links allow artists who want to learn more to do so; images include image descriptions.
- IOTA's public art calls list deadlines, timelines and artist fees clearly.
- IOTA's public art calls are screenreader accessible and available in PDF download.
- IOTA's public art calls do not require a proposal as a way to reduce the artists' unpaid labour and workload; use of Google form.
- IOTA's public art calls focus on creating opportunities for marginalized artists.
- Jury members include marginalized artists and community-members with whom IOTA has built previous relationships. The selection process uses a rubric to create access for the jury.
- Advocating for reasonable artist fees and labour for artists.

Public Art: Access Tensions and Gaps

- Need for an access plan for how to pitch access initiatives to partners on public art projects when IOTA is not managing the project.
- Access is negotiated and decided on a per project-basis. This means that access practices are not consistent.

- Constraints in creating access when working with larger entities with different approaches to access.
- Constant need to advocate for reasonable artist fees and labour for artists when working with large entities such as cities.
- Lack of budget included for access and community engagement on public art projects.
- The suggestion of QR codes are often shut down by project partners.
- Didactics typically do not offer audio descriptions.
- A desire to learn more about technology used to facilitate access within the realm of public art.

Events and Exhibitions: Access Practices

- Have held mask-mandatory events and exhibitions.
- Livestream is provided for art fairs and artist talks.
- ASL has been booked in the past.
- Multiple contacts for ASL interpreters with an awareness of intersectionality.
- Hired an access activator, Kristina McMullen, to help with an immersive exhibition at Nocturne. Resulted in creative access practices for immersive technology including audio description (10 artists) for an ambient sound video projection.
- Hired an access activator, Kristina McMullen, to conduct a physical access audit of a pop-up exhibition space.

- A quiet space has been provided for event volunteers in the past; volunteers can take time as needed.
- IOTA has mentioned a desire to develop access practices for Deaf, hard of hearing and blind and low vision audiences to engage with exhibitions.
- A desire to learn more about how to translate artworks into different sensory experiences to meet different access needs.
- A desire to learn about responsibly creating space when presenting triggering work or performances.

Events and Exhibitions: Access Tensions and Gaps

- Masking policy is inconsistent across events and exhibitions.
- Tension between personal accommodations vs structural or organizational accommodations.
- Corporate norms and the capitalist context of art fairs make disability justice oriented access practices difficult to implement in these spaces.
- Image descriptions are not done by vendors or partners.

Marketing and Communications: Access Practices

- Image descriptions are used on social media.
- Image descriptions and alt text are used on the website.

- Anti-generative AI for writing image descriptions.

Marketing and Communications: Access Tensions and Gaps

- Lack of image description bank for artwork that is for sale and that is exhibited often; could consult artists in creating these descriptions.
- No shared approach to image descriptions across IOTA.
- Publicists who have worked on IOTA's social media in the past have not followed through with the ask for image descriptions; even after being given a document by staff that shows how to create them.

HR: Access Practices

- Staff-generated access guide documents and resources have been shared, including on masking policy, risk mitigation, and how to host mask-mandatory events.

HR: Access Tensions and Gaps

- Being such a small organisation, there is no dedicated HR department.
- Lack of internal access policy created for staff.
- No Access Coordinator role within the organization.

General Recommendations

- Articulate IOTA's approach to access including a vision and mandate.
- Create an access policy with a checklist (template) for the different areas in which IOTA works. Such as, Public Art, Working with Artists, Virtual Events, In-Person Events, Workshops, Exhibitions and Artist Talks.
- Create an internal access policy for staff.
- Create a policy to converse with potential partners about accessibility and committing to a "baseline" before agreeing to a partnership.
- Hire an access coordinator or disability arts consultant to provide a workshop for staff on different accessibility models and reflect on where IOTA fits within these conceptions of access as a team, i.e. universal design, disability justice, etc. Consider how access frameworks may shift depending on the sector IOTA is engaging with.
- Hold regular access-specific check-ins with the team to discuss how access is working or not within their particular role and sector and if they have suggestions for access initiatives or processes.
- Create an access resource document with information on how to implement various access practices and the steps involved, such as how to book an ASL interpreter for performances, to create ease of implementation.
- Implement mask-mandatory events.
- Learn more about access for people with visual disabilities and Deaf/hard of hearing communities. Translating visual arts into tactile or other forms of experience.

Recommended Areas of Focus for Access Activations

- Create an access policy with a checklist (template) for the different areas in which IOTA works. Such as, Public Art, Working with Artists, Virtual Events, In-Person Events, Workshops, Exhibitions and Artist Talks.
- Create an access resource document with information on how to implement various access practices and the steps involved, such as how to book an ASL interpreter for performances, to create ease of implementation.
- Create an access plan for how to pitch access to partners on public art projects when IOTA is not managing the project.