

A Completely
Customized
World Where
Everything Is Just
How I Like and
Need It:

The Work of
Shannon
Finnegan
29

by Mary Banas



Shannon Finnegan, *Self Portrait*, 2018, digital prints, 35.5 cm x 27.9 cm; installation view from *The Invisible Dog* Art Center, Brooklyn, New York
 PHOTO: SIMON COURCHEL; IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

What if a typeface, one of the most ubiquitous examples of visual design in the world, could be a voice for “the other”? Reading is almost a passive activity as eyes scan storefronts or a newspaper spread. What if, instead of implying mechanical perfection, the letterforms expressed imperfection? Would our shared consciousness around ability shift? Shannon Finnegan’s work uses typography and hand lettering as an invitation to participate in the thoughts, emotions and everyday experiences of a person with a disability.

Self-Portrait (2017) is a collection of drawings in pastel-coloured pencil on letter-size sheets of paper, which, at first glance appear to be flyers on a busy billboard, filling the window of The Invisible Dog Art Center in Brooklyn, New York. Together, from a distance, the drawings read as a cheerful and inviting quilt. The colourful panes act as a flash,

but simultaneously as a kind of camouflage. To at once blend in and draw attention is core to Finnegan’s message: people with disabilities should be seen, although not merely as the “other.” Up close, text in the artist’s distinctive lettering style is revealed—confident but quirky capitals make for whimsical yet behaved compositions. These bursts of text alternate between externalizations of inner desires, like: “A COMPLETELY CUSTOMIZED WORLD WHERE EVERYTHING IS JUST AS I LIKE AND NEED IT” and melancholic, momentary reports from the artist’s daily life, as in “FALLING BEHIND IN A GROUP OF PEOPLE WALKING,” or “DISTANCES TOO SHORT TO TAKE A TAXI BUT TOO TIRING TO WALK.” Taken together, the project constructs an intimate and generous portrait of the artist’s stream of consciousness. Surrounding the lettering, a deliberate and controlled



Shannon Finnegan, *Anti-Stairs Club Lounge*, 2017–2018, furniture, custom textiles, books, snacks; installation view from the Wassaic Project, New York
 PHOTO: VERÓNICA GONZÁLEZ MAYORAL;
 IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

application of coloured pencil hatching grows organically to fill the page, demonstrating a relationship between order and entropy. If order is the way of the built, ableist world, a lack of predictability reflects Finnegan’s experience in it. Lastly, the use of pastel yellows, pinks and blues conjures both a doctor’s office and a cheerful birthday party, making disability uncomfortably familiar and, at the same time, something to be celebrated.

The artist’s experience with doctor’s visits also surfaces in the project *Anti-Stairs Club Lounge* (2018), a cozy, welcoming and carefully considered waiting room—or lounge, depending on how you look at it—which was installed inside the Wassaic Project’s Maxon Mills building in rural Wassaic, New York. Modern chairs, pillows patterned with Finnegan’s own needlepoint, and potted plants are accompanied by

friendly objects, like yarn-embroidered coasters, and a pink ceramic bowl in the shape of a hand giving a thumb’s-up, filled with candies. There’s a charging station, a sign on top of a mini-fridge that reads “HAVE A SELTZER” and an array of books that ostensibly inform Finnegan’s practice. A large wall quote set in lettering that mimics staircases reads: “THE HIGH=ER YOU CLIMB THE FARTHER YOU FALL,” a strange platitude that functions as a gentle but clear critique of the lack of access in the converted grain elevator—the only way up is by stairs. Sitting in the *Anti-Stairs Club Lounge* is an alternative to walking up the historic 32-metre-tall stairs, at the top of which rotating exhibitions from artists are on display.

There are echoes of this space-making effort in Finnegan’s *Museum Benches* (2018), first shown at Dedalus Foundation in Brooklyn, New York. Each in this series

Choreography based on my everyday movements

Shannon Finnegan in collaboration with Gabriel Loeb, *Disability Typography*, 2018, vector graphics made with Paper-Letters
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

of geometric, Reflex Blue plywood benches, big enough to seat two to three people comfortably, features 18-centimetre-tall, all-caps hand lettering by Finnegan. One backrest reads “THIS EXHIBITION HAS ASKED ME TO STAND FOR TOO LONG,” with the seat reading “SIT IF YOU AGREE.” Another bench, with the same phrase on the seat, reads “I’D RATHER BE SITTING” on its back. Much like the *Anti-Stairs Club Lounge*, this project—and the comfort it proffers—appeals to non-disabled people as much as it does the disabled. Finnegan’s deft deployment of functionality, comfort, humour and stark truth makes *Museum Benches* a kind of interactive protest sign.

As evidenced above, the pairing of snappy, gently defiant short texts and hand lettering runs through many of the artist’s projects. *Disability Typography* (2018), a collaboration with artist Gabriel

Loeb, uses Paper-Letters—a Javascript-based tool that Loeb created—to manipulate letterforms. The letterforms are a delicate outline of a nondescript sans-serif typeface where random letters have been altered to appear melted, broken, folded or like they have experienced a glitch. If computer typography—namely the various system fonts—represent the mainstream, then Finnegan’s hand lettering represents the personal, the imperfect, the valuable and the unique.

In an episode of the podcast *Designing for Humanity*, subtitled “Advocating for Inclusivity Through Art and Conversation,” Finnegan expanded on the *Disability Typography* project:

“I think design is often searching for this elegant, smooth, easy, effortless solution. I think that’s part of what the appeal of universal design is. Like, oh, if we just think about or design for a



Shannon Finnegan in collaboration with Charles Mathis and Chat Travieso, *Do you want us here or not 1*, 2018, medium density overlaid plywood panel, paint, 91 cm × 66 cm × 183 cm

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST; DEDALUS FOUNDATION

specific need, we're gonna make everything better! And there are great examples of that happening. But I think I'm interested in the ways that there might never be a simple solution. There might always be a lot of complexity. It might be really hard. And so, I think of my role in some ways as bringing friction to some of the design process and kind of pointing to complexity and trying to expand complexity, when I feel like a lot of what's happening is about simplifying and distilling."

In this vein of promoting complexity and drawing attention to the realm of human experience that falls beyond ableism, Finnegan's project *Portable Mural* (2018) declares "REINVENTING THE STRANGENESS OF MY MOVEMENT AS AN ART FORM THAT ONLY I AM THE PERFECT PRACTITIONER OF" in large letters cut from brown kraft paper and

decorated with a lightly dotted pattern. This public gesture of radical self-acceptance—which first appeared at Brooklyn Studios for Dance and subsequently in *Means of Egress*, an exhibition of the Art and Disability residency at the Dedalus Foundation—reframes "strange" movement as a singular, artistic capacity, perhaps perfectly epitomizing the artist's ability to forge a path for a renewed, not "othered," kind of visibility for disabled people. The magic of Finnegan's work is that in making the speculative world she wants and needs for herself, she is also making it for everyone else.

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