

PRACTICES / PRATIQUES

Crippling

Failure

/Atanas Bozdarov/

Atanas Bozdarov is an artist and designer whose recent projects have explored systems of access and accessibility, unnoticed conditions of disability and design, and architectural propositions for public space. He received his MDes from OCAD University and teaches design in the University of Toronto Mississauga and Sheridan College's joint Art and Art History program.

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A break can be how you leak information out as well as how you expose the failure of a system.

– Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use?*¹

My practice takes my relationship with the built environment as a starting point for investigating questions of access and accessibility, rooted in my lived experience with a physical disability. Incorporating sculpture, graphic design, and photography, my work is concerned with exploring the intended function, use, and uselessness of art and design objects to reveal unseen conditions of disability and design. We notice things when they fail—when they don't fit, when they break. My practice organizes itself around ideas of failure: structural failures in the built environment, failures with personal mobility devices, and failure in the representation of disability in arts scholarship, in order to reveal the failures of structures and systems of access and accessibility at several levels.

As someone whose daily movement through the city is affected by the degree to which architectural structures are accessible, or the extent to which accessibility devices achieve their function, I have an intimate relationship with ramps—those simple wedge-shaped structures that provide access to space—and I notice their presence and their absence in the streets and buildings I frequent. A simple inclined plane influences a person's behaviour and, as such, the ramp is a form that both provides and symbolizes access and its relation to power.

Bad Ramps is an ongoing series of objects that resemble access ramps. It borrows strategies from Critical Design to interrogate more abstractly the ways in which accessibility manifests as a condition of the built environment. Popularized by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, Critical Design refuses the role of design as primarily a problem-solving practice and rejects the notion that its function is restricted to commercial purposes, solely for the production of objects for sale and for use. Instead, through conceptual, provocative, and speculative proposals, Critical Design uses design to critique and raise awareness. In the *Bad Ramps* series, design is employed not as a definitive tool to a set end, but as a means but which to pose questions, inspire debate, and offer new perspectives. The uselessness of each ramp in the series is made apparent through intentionally faulty designs, absurd material choices, and incomplete construction. Rather than offering some kind of design “solution,” the absence of viable functionality calls attention to the failure of ramps in general as a minimal solution, and to the failure of a larger system.

Extending the sculptural exploration of ramps, my recent work is the result of photodocumentary fieldwork in Inglewood and Kensington, the two Calgary neighbourhoods selected to be part of *Ramp It Up*—a local initiative inspired by Toronto's StopGap Foundation, an organization that promotes barrier-free spaces by providing small access ramps to business in Toronto. The photographs include brightly painted portable ramps produced by the initiative, as well as ramps quickly created and installed by the city to provide access to street patios while indoor dining remained closed during the pandemic. However, the lack of interest in these accessibility structures was clear from the state they were in: several were misaligned and out of place, one was in a ditch, another was flipped upside down, and still another was broken but precariously still in use. Presenting these ramps as large-scale photographs hung in a gallery repositions them as objects worth paying attention to, and at the same time encourages the viewer to notice when ramps are absent and access is denied. In this way, the project is both documentation and provocation.

I examine the failure in disability culture and arts scholarship in the bookwork *Accessibility (Whitechapel)* (2019). According to Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, each volume in the extensive “Documents of

Contemporary Art” series is the definitive anthology of a theme, practice, or concern that is central to contemporary visual culture. After fifty-plus volumes, they still have yet to produce one on the topic related to disability arts. My book is intended to critique this gap in the scholarship, and questions why Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press are uninterested in this critical topic. By manufacturing an aesthetically identical iteration of the series and by leaving its pages blank, I temporarily and speculatively dupe the would-be reader, while mimicking the non-existence of the text in the series.

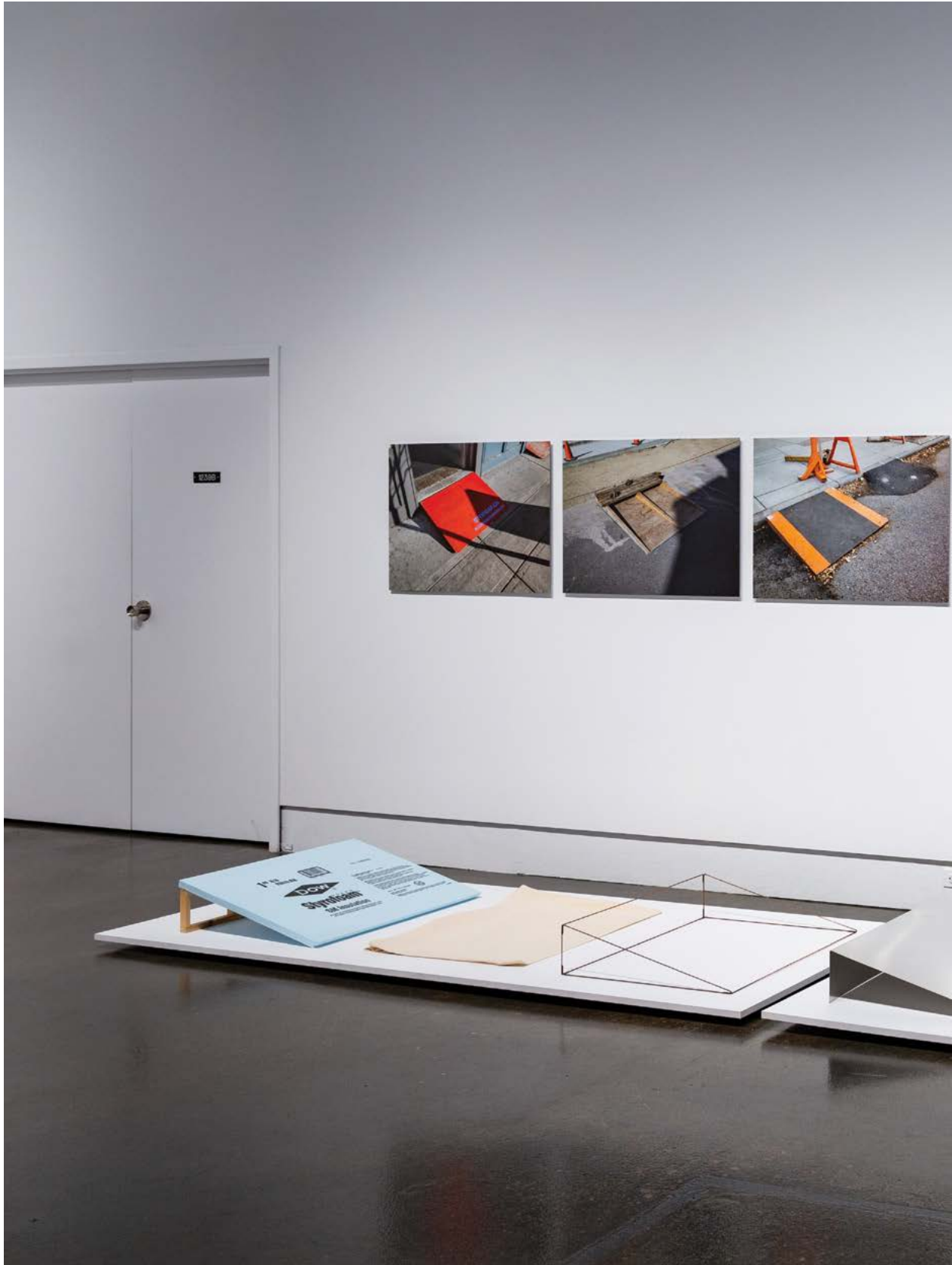
1 Sarah Ahmed, *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).



/fig. 1/ Atanas Bozdarov, *Tilt Ramp 2*, 2022. Plywood, bicycle rack, 6" x 32" x 24".
Photo: Alison Postma.



/fig. 2/ Atanas Bozdarov, *Styrofoam Ramp*, 2019. Styrofoam, wood, 6" x 32" x 24".
Photo: Scott Lee.





/fig. 3/ Atanas Bozdarov, *Bad Ramps* series and *Calgary Ramp Photos* series. Installation view, *The Further Apart Things Seem*, University of Waterloo Art Gallery, 2022. Photo: Scott Lee.



/fig. 4/ Atanas Bozdarov, *Calgary Ramp Photos*, 2022. Digital prints mounted on Alupanel, 32" x 24". Courtesy of the artist.



/fig. 5/ Atanas Bozdarov, *Calgary Ramp Photos*, 2022. Digital prints mounted on Alupanel, 32" x 24". Courtesy of the artist.



/fig. 6/ Atanas Bozdarov, *Accessibility (Whitechapel)*, 2019. Ink on paper, bubble wrap, 6" x 8.25" x 1.25". Photo: Scott Lee.