The Crafted Newsletter

Design & Disability

Back to the V&A again, this time for my report on the Design & Disability exhibition. This is definitely an interesting one, but perhaps as much for reasons surrounding the exhibition as for the exhibition itself.

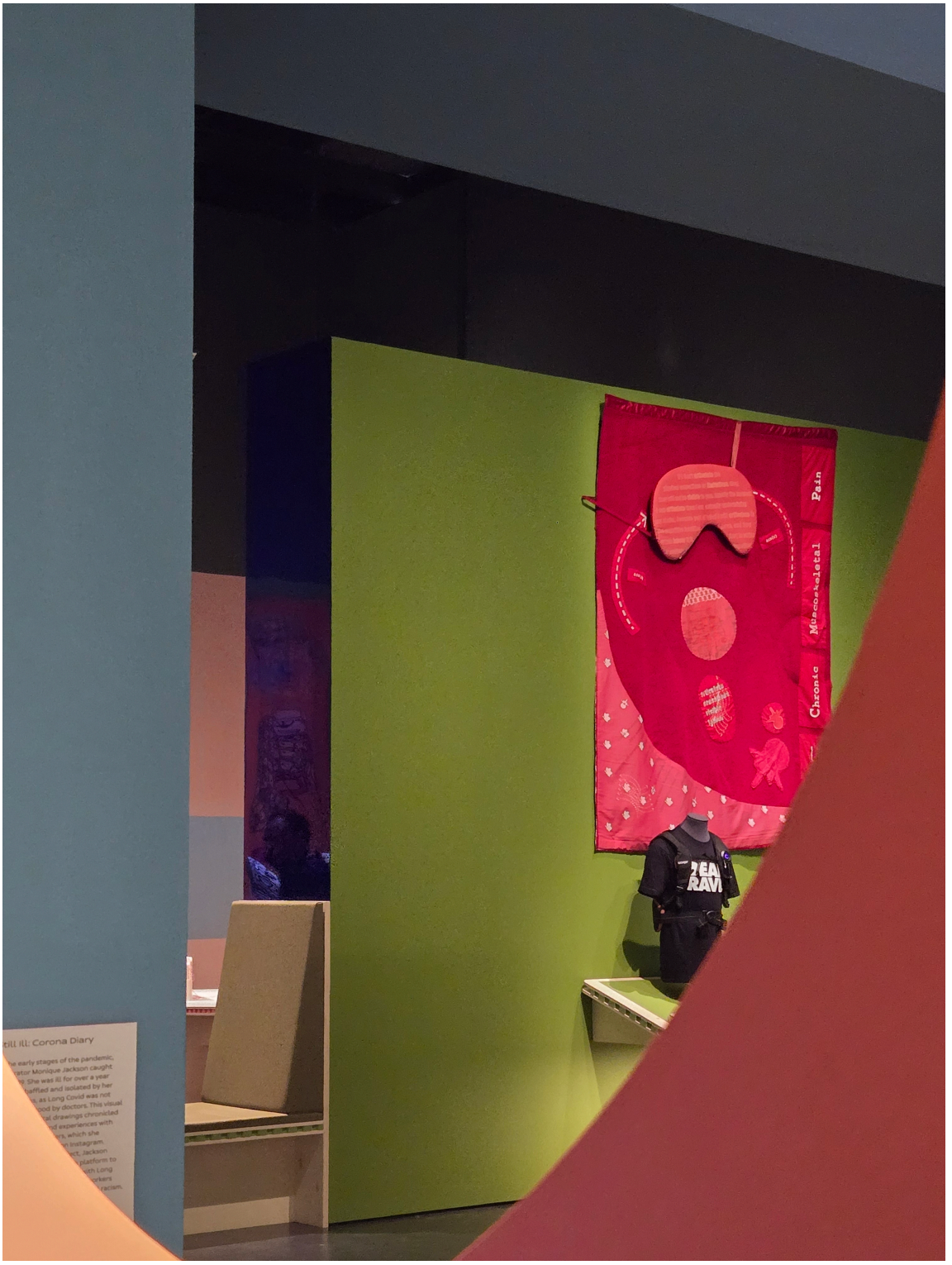
I went (with Simon, for once!) to the Friday late member preview night. Now, bear in mind all the member previews I've booked on to, even for less popular times on Thursdays or Fridays, have sold out - Naomi, Fabergé, Cartier, Chanel... okay, big, glittery names - but I was still shocked and disappointed how quiet the member preview for this one was. At a peak time on a Friday, there were perhaps 6-8 other visitors in the exhibition space along with us at any given time.

Sure, from an experience point of view it was worlds away from the usual crush-and-queue to ogle something pretty in a case, and I'm sure for any disabled visitors that's even more valuable. But I couldn't help being disappointed in the V&A membership at large that this exhibition clearly isn't as well supported as the "typical" fare.

In terms of the exhibition design, the curator talk made it clear that this had been done in wide consultation with disabled people with a variety of needs, and indeed the curator

team has first-hand experience with disability. "Nothing about us without us" is a phrase and an ethos that features heavily. The exhibition space opens with an orientation room, which explains the various accessibility features - large print, plain English, braille, BSL, audio-description, and tactile maps are all available, as well as colour-zoning, more seating than you usually get in an exhibition, less/no music, and they have designated brighter lighting sessions. Tickets are free for Disabled visitors and an accompanying person.

Of course they would want to ensure that the very people the exhibition concerns are able to access it - but it does beg the question as to how they climb down from that pedestal for future exhibitions. I mean, why shouldn't this be the standard level of provision to make all of their exhibitions truly accessible? It will be interesting to see how they justify the inevitable backslide in the future, because unfortunately I'm 99% sure they won't start building this level of accessibility in by default.



The exhibition has three themes: the first is visibility or activism - with many slogan T-shirts, placards, artwork and protest documentary materials illustrating the historic and ongoing fight to be seen, heard, included and accepted.

The second, under the heading "Tools", showcases clothing, utility items and technology that Disabled, D/deaf and neurodivergent people have created since the 1940s to solve their everyday challenges, many of which have brought added benefits to a wider population or have even become features we don't even associate with their origins (which comes back to lack of awareness of Disabled contributions) - like the Touchstream keyboard by Fingerworks (2005) by Wayne Westerman. Developed as a response to the designer's constant struggle with repetitive strain injury, the tech was bought by Apple in 2005 and became the foundation of the iPhone touchscreen.

The final theme is "Living" with a section illustrating how Disabled people have created change in their environments through protest, or have designed the types of spaces they want to live in.

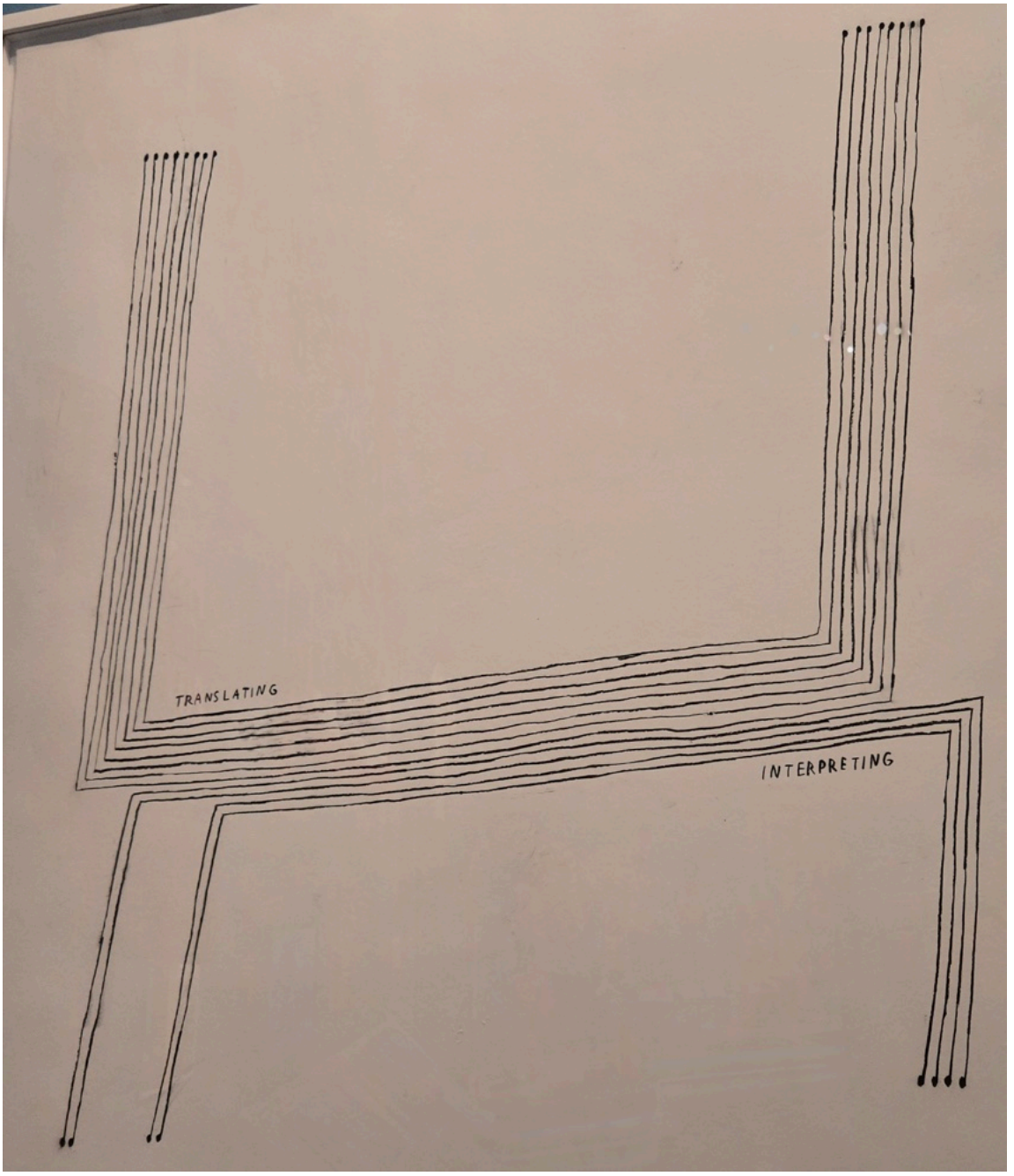
There were a number of language-related highlights throughout the exhibition that I found particularly interesting.

504 Font

Designed by Emily Sara to honour the "504 Sit-ins", a series of protests in the USA in April 1977. Sara took the letters from activists' placards to create the font. "504" refers to section 504 of the 1977 Rehabilitation Act, which demanded greater accessibility for Disabled people.

Signstrokes

Designed by Adolfs Kristapsons and Chris Laing, who in their final stage of qualifying as architects in 2021 (!) struggled to agree on architecture terms in BSL, their native language. They worked with UCL and Frank Barnes School to create a new set of BSL architecture terms.

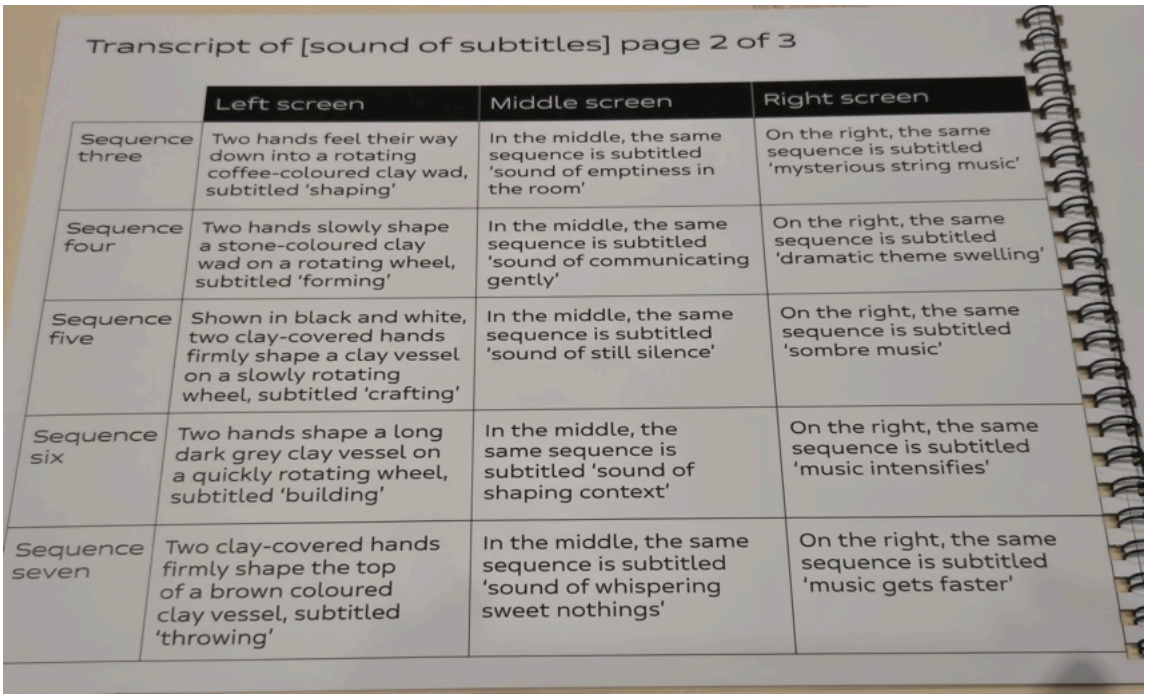


[sound of subtitles]

Closing out the exhibition, a really interesting visual artwork showing a potter throwing on a wheel, where instead of the usual, somewhat dry descriptive captions the artist Seo Hye Lee has provided more personal and emotive interpretations of the moving images. (see below)

Translating/Interpreting

An artwork by Christine Sun Kim, (see above) whose art practice challenges the conventional dominance of sound in society. This piece uses offset lines and elongated musical notes to represent the challenges and inherent differences in interpreting and translating ASL into English.



Transcript of [sound of subtitles] page 2 of 3

	Left screen	Middle screen	Right screen
Sequence three	Two hands feel their way down into a rotating coffee-coloured clay wad, subtitled 'shaping'	In the middle, the same sequence is subtitled 'sound of emptiness in the room'	On the right, the same sequence is subtitled 'mysterious string music'
Sequence four	Two hands slowly shape a stone-coloured clay wad on a rotating wheel, subtitled 'forming'	In the middle, the same sequence is subtitled 'sound of communicating gently'	On the right, the same sequence is subtitled 'dramatic theme swelling'
Sequence five	Shown in black and white, two clay-covered hands firmly shape a clay vessel on a slowly rotating wheel, subtitled 'crafting'	In the middle, the same sequence is subtitled 'sound of still silence'	On the right, the same sequence is subtitled 'sombre music'
Sequence six	Two hands shape a long dark grey clay vessel on a quickly rotating wheel, subtitled 'building'	In the middle, the same sequence is subtitled 'sound of shaping context'	On the right, the same sequence is subtitled 'music intensifies'
Sequence seven	Two clay-covered hands firmly shape the top of a brown coloured clay vessel, subtitled 'throwing'	In the middle, the same sequence is subtitled 'sound of whispering sweet nothings'	On the right, the same sequence is subtitled 'music gets faster'

Design and Disability is on until February 2026 at V&A South Kensington. I think I'll definitely visit again the next time I'm over there - it's a relatively small exhibition and I'm interested to see what else I draw from it on a second viewing.

When you receive this newsletter I'll have not long got back from a quick trip to Paris - so expect more fashion exhibition content coming soon!
