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## **‘Disabling’ the Museum: Curator as Infrastructural Activist**

Amanda Cachia

### **Introduction**

In her book *What Makes a Great Exhibition?* (2006), art historian, curator and critic, Paula Marincola posed the question: “Can we ever get beyond the essential conversation of displaying works of art in conventional, dedicated spaces?”<sup>1</sup> As a curator focused on situating representations of disability and creative conceptions of access as a critical component of art history, contemporary art practice and museum displays *within alternative platforms*, Marincola’s question struck me as exciting, and full of potential. If curating an exhibition of disability-related content within a conventional exhibition complex has been historically absent, for the most part, what other kinds of spaces and places might offer more opportunities and an expanded definition of ‘disability’ and ‘access’ for the essential display of disability art? Most critically, is there room for a revision of art history and entirely new representations and art experiences through the funnel of the still-ghettoizing disability label within such alternative spaces?

I’ve been a curator since 2001, after finishing my first Masters degree in Curatorial Studies at Goldsmiths College in London, where my exhibitions have always focused on identity politics (such as feminism), social justice and other hard-hitting issues, ranging from war and violence to urban decay and environmental degradation. Since returning to graduate school in 2010, I’ve curated two exhibitions with disability-related content. These were *Medusa’s Mirror: Fears, Spells & Other Transfixed Positions* for Pro Arts Gallery in Oakland, California (2011) and *What Can a Body Do?* for Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery at Haverford College, Pennsylvania

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<sup>1</sup> Paula Marincola, *What Makes a Great Exhibition?* (2006) in Terry Smith’s “Shifting the Exhibitionary Complex” in *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), 57.

(2012).<sup>2</sup> So why a turn to disability-related content in my practice? First and foremost, I identify as disabled. I was born with a rare form of dwarfism named brachyolmia. In my 15 years as a curator working in Australia, the UK, Canada and now the USA, I noticed that conventional art history, along with other disciplines in the humanities, has not accounted for intellectually and physically disabled subjects and their accompanying atypical bodies through the art museum and their curated exhibitions, through commercial art galleries and biennials, and the entire exhibition complex structure. I was puzzled by the fact that I rarely came across any substantial or critical engagement with disability and access in curated exhibitions at large-scale or medium-size museums and art galleries. Of course, a small number of patronizing and demeaning representations have appeared in art genre presentations such as ‘outsider art’ but these derogatory constructs have generally failed to be challenged by art historians, critics, curators and artists. In my work as a curator and PhD student, it is time to offer a revision to these circumstances by addressing how contemporary art by both disabled and non-disabled artists can resonate with the complex embodiment of disabled corporeality. It is important to build a new vocabulary and methodology around curating disability and access in challenging and stimulating ways.

Taking cue from several recent texts on contemporary curatorial practice, such as Australian art historian Terry Smith’s *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (2012), he outlines that necessary characteristics for the contemporary curator require “curating to be a flexible platform-building practice – tied to the specifics of place as well as appropriate international and regional factors...”<sup>3</sup> Within this platform-building practice then, which I find compelling for the fact that

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<sup>2</sup> Please visit the *What Can a Body Do?* exhibition website at <http://exhibits.haverford.edu/whatcanabodydo/>

<sup>3</sup> Terry Smith, “The Infrastructural” in *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), 252.

it demands experimentation, curators as ‘process shapers’ and ‘program builders’ must simultaneously move between the resources that an institution offers, and yet also find freedom in public spaces and places, the virtual domain and other institutional infrastructures not typically associated with art. Smith calls these types of curators “infrastructural activists.”<sup>4</sup> Along parallel lines, museum studies scholars Richard Sandell and Jocelyn Dodd write of an “*activist museum practice*, intended to construct and elicit support amongst audiences (and other constituencies) for alternative, progressive ways of thinking about disability.”<sup>5</sup> While Smith is speaking more broadly about radicalizing museums as institutions and their practices, Sandell and Dodd are writing more specifically about disrupting museum practice for the benefit of the disabled community. What happens if Smith’s ‘infrastructural activist’ were to dovetail with Sandell and Dodd’s ‘activist museum practice’?

Smith, Sandell and Dodd’s formulation of the contemporary curator as ‘infrastructural activist’ within an ‘activist museum practice’ works well for my agenda, where I aim to ‘disable’ the limiting and pejorative practices of the art museum in a number of ways. First, I do this by offering exhibitions with non-reductive disability-related content, accompanied by programming that extends the thesis of the exhibition, such as artist talks, performances, symposia, websites, publications and more. If the current trend in curating, according to Smith, is to be anti-disciplinary as an infrastructural activist, within a traditionally disciplinary realm, then surely my project as a curator focused on the myriad political representations, communications and sensorial and phenomenological experiences of the disabled subject will find a resounding welcome. To be anti-disciplinary in an art museum is to think beyond the ‘main event’ of the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Sandell and Jocelyn Dodd, “Activist Practice” in *Re-Presenting Disability: Activism and Agency in the Museum*, eds. Richard Sandell, Jocelyn Dodd and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 3.

exhibition of objects, where discursive aspects of exhibition programming, such as artist talks, performances, film screenings, symposiums, round-table conversations and more, are given equal billing to the exhibition, rather than simply adjunct off-shoots.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, to curate a round-table conversation for example, might be considered an artwork in and of itself. But second, I also challenge the museum to think about how access can move beyond a mere practical conundrum, often added in as an after-thought once an exhibition has been installed, to how it might be used as a dynamic, critical and creative tool in art-making and curating. An exhibition can therefore attempt to reveal *process* in conjunction with final objects as *outcome*.<sup>7</sup> The curator might be challenged by access as the *concept and/or content* of artwork, by focusing on questions such as, can audio description or a sequence of captioning accompanying a film, be a work of art? Is American Sign Language a performance? How can sub-titles and audio description work together to create an interesting ‘dialogue’ about access that renders a work of art or a film completely inaccessible for a normative audience? In other words, how can the tables be turned on access, and access for whom or for what? What are the inherent ethical questions and issues of agency stemming from these possibilities? I believe these alternative curatorial methodologies offer much scope for challenging deeply ingrained reductive attitudes towards disability.

This paper will explore how I attempt to ‘disable’ the museum through curating my third exhibition containing disability-related content, that I consider to be part of my work as a radical,

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<sup>6</sup> To learn more about my ideas on this subject, see my article entitled “Talking Blind: Museums, Access and the Discursive Turn,” *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Double Issue: Museum experience and blindness & General Issue. Vol. 33, No. 3 (2013). <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/3758/3281>

<sup>7</sup> Beryl Graham and Sara Cook cite an exhibition entitled *This Is the Show and the Show Is Many Things* (Ghent, 1994-1995) where the boundaries of exhibition practice were blurred, such as ideas around storage, labels, studio, exhibition, and improvised collaborations with audience and artists, and lectures, talks and performances became the main event in the exhibition space. Beryl Graham and Sara Cook, “Rethinking Curating – Contexts, Practices, and Processes” in *Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: The MIT Press, 2010), 159.

infrastructural activist: *Crippling Cyberspace: A Contemporary Virtual Art Exhibition* (2013) hosted by and in conjunction with the Common Pulse Intersecting Abilities Art Festival and Symposium and the *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*.<sup>8</sup> The space for this exhibition offers a new experimental virtual platform hosted by an online journal. I argue that part of the decolonizing work of disability studies is to offer opportunities to both curators and artists where their work can be displayed within unconventional gallery settings (such as the virtual platform) in order to ‘crip’ art history and contemporary art practice. By incorporating discursive programming, access as a creative methodology, a sensitive approach towards curating complex attitudes towards disability and language, and a sustained engagement with the ethics and practicalities of curating disability-related subject matter, I’m stimulated by the possibilities the virtual platform offers my curator/activist agenda in paving critical space for the disabled subject. In returning to Marincola’s quandary then, my curatorial, activist work in ‘disabling’ the museum and *Crippling Cyberspace*, aims to push against the conventional practices of exhibitions.

### **Exhibition as Digital Platform**

*Crippling Cyberspace: A Contemporary Virtual Art Exhibition* is an online exhibition that offers four diverse, newly commissioned projects – a music video, three interactive websites, and an audio piece that focus on disability, that utilizes the unique platform of cyberspace in which to distribute their work. In other words, cyberspace becomes a performance space in which to enact their politico-cultural works. The exhibition is hosted on the *Canadian Journal of Disability*

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<sup>8</sup> To learn more about the *Common Pulse* festival, visit [www.commonpulse.ca](http://www.commonpulse.ca)

*Studies* website, launched as a new issue with its own unique image and landing page (Volume 2, Number 4, Fall, 2013). The Table of Contents lists a 'Foreword' written by the Artistic Director of *Common Pulse*, Geoffrey Shea, and under 'Artworks,' each work is available as a link in various formats including HTML, PDF or embedded MP3. Other headings include 'Curator Essay,' 'Artist Interviews' (as audio/video files and transcripts), 'Artist & Curator Biographies,' 'Audio Descriptions' and 'Acknowledgements.' It was decided to host this exhibition within the same CJDS journal format in order to be consistent with other issues, and also so that viewers were made quickly aware that *Crippling Cyberspace* had a clear affiliation with the journal. This is useful given that the journal is housed within all the major academic search engines and thus the art would have a broad, public reach, but it would also be targeted to academic audiences who are more accustomed to reading scholarly articles in a journal, than looking at or listening to a work of art. As Dolmage says, "things look more academic, but that opens up a unique public and academic audience."<sup>9</sup>

The projects by artist Katherine Araniello (UK), ethnographer Cassandra Hartblay (USA), artist, writer and lecturer Sara Hendren (USA) and Montreal's In/Accessible collective – m.i.a. (Canada) also suggest that an online presence expands and equips their practices with new ethical and critical frameworks in which to funnel their ideas. Each working within specific cultural and political contexts, they all explore the limitations, possibilities and openings of social and physical architectures both real and imagined, and how cyberspace might come to offer an alternative. Their projects suggest that crip movement in cyberspace looks, feels and sounds different to the everyday social realities of their movement in real time that is often littered with barriers in an urban environment designed for the so-called average person. The

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<sup>9</sup> Jay Dolmage, email conversation with the author, August 25, 2013

artists were asked to consider questions such as, what are the alternative constraints or possibilities for disabled people in cyberspace, and what kinds of crip artistic interpretations can fill out these spaces in order to make new meaning? What might the virtual realm offer disability aesthetics? The body's exteriority *and* interiority becomes usefully abstracted or 'common' in its difference, through the filter of technological apparatuses. This effectively moves us away from binaries, such as disability/ability, and instead focuses on a phenomenology of cyberspace, which in turn provides a new language and code for complex embodiment. Can cyberspace then, be considered a type of brain, or prosthesis, that provides emotional, intellectual and sensorial support for disabled people?

While much has been theorized and written regarding how the digital realm has expanded and offered new possibilities to contemporary artistic practice, particularly within new media art, communication and technology studies, and other related fields in the humanities, exploring the potential of cyberspace *in relation to disability and curatorial practice* has been largely under-explored.<sup>10</sup> The application of curatorial practice within virtual platforms in general, however, has caught the attention of a number of scholars for some time, such as the collection of essays in the 2006 text *Curating Immateriality: The Work of the Curator in the Age of Network Systems*, (as a take off Walter Benjamin's seminal essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility*, 1936, and reworked by Bill Nichols in *The Work of Culture in the Age of Cybernetic Systems*, 1988). Joasia Krysa says that curating no longer has an "ontologically given nature" in the wake of global transformations in this age of networked systems.<sup>11</sup> This collection of essays explores how cyberspace has changed curatorial practice within a wider socio-political

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<sup>10</sup> Note the distinction between disability and curatorial practice versus disability and museum access practices.

<sup>11</sup> Joasia Krysa, "Curating Immateriality: The Work of the Curator in the Age of Network Systems" in *Curating Immateriality: The Work of the Curator in the Age of Network Systems* (London: England, Autonomedia, The Data Browser, 2006), 8.

context. Krysa also encourages curators of immaterial art to consider the practice of curating as not only a creative and critical practice, but one steeped in politics.<sup>12</sup> This works well for my vision, where I apply curatorial practice of immaterial art in *Crippling Cyberspace* in application to disability politics. Here, formations of power and control can be re-conceptualized. The essay by Christine Paul, “Flexible Contexts, Democratic Filtering, and Computer-Aided Curating” talks about how the curator’s job in selecting and filtering art continues from physical space into virtual space, where “describing, classifying, creating contexts and re-contextualizing” still occurs within the online environment, although within the online space, Paul states that this ‘public curation’ “promises to construct more ‘democratic’ and participatory forms of filtering.”<sup>13</sup> (She also provide various models of online curating). If curating becomes immaterial through the use of digital space as the platform for showing contemporary art, how do curators then respond to code, net art or software art and generative media?

The 1996 text, *Immersed in Technology: Art and Virtual Environment*, published by the Banff Centre for the Arts in Canada, is important to consider as a sort of template for my work at the intersection of identity and digital artistic and curatorial practices because several essays in this compendium look at how race and aboriginal narratives intersect with cyberspace.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, these authors look for how a stigmatized, minority identity can be formulated or transformed through cyberspace. In his essay, “New Media, Culture, Identity,” John Conomos pushes this further by arguing that it behooves us to further critique the elimination of “history, identity and geography” taking place through the online interface that is transforming polycentric

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>14</sup> These essays are “Virtual Skin: Articulating Race in Cyberspace” by Cameron Bailey and “Aboriginal Narratives in Cyberspace” by Loretta Todd in *Immersed in Technology: Art and Virtual Environments*, ed. Mary Anne Moser (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 1996).

culture into a homogenizing force.<sup>15</sup> Disability identity politics is part of this rupturing critique that needs to be addressed.

Finally, the most recent book is by Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook, entitled *Re-Thinking Curating: Art after New Media*, (2010) where they talk about the problems of curating new media in the institution.<sup>16</sup> While it is true that technology and the digital realm have become immensely popular within museums as tools for access and interpretation, or as a theme, cyberspace has rarely been applied as a replacement or alternative site to the white box of the traditional museum within the subject matter of disability. Graham and Cook talk of how more experimental forms of exhibition-making, such as software programs or data flow, the exhibition as trade show and the exhibition as broadcast, might “fit well in response to the fluid, collaborative, emergent nature of new media art.”<sup>17</sup> I’d like to suggest that *Crippling Cyberspace* is situated within an experimental curatorial practice that embodies similar innovative qualities to digital-based work itself.

*Crippling Cyberspace* has expanded and broadened my curatorial practice then, as virtual space has now become my unique exhibition platform, where I am no longer limited by the constraints of gallery walls, lights, pedestals or expensive technological equipment like DVD players, projectors or flat-screen televisions. Indeed, I am now working within a ‘museum without walls’ and one that promises to be a living information space. I no longer have to worry about the normal practicalities of shipping or insuring art, not least what it will all cost. Instead,

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<sup>15</sup> John Conomos, “New Media, Culture, Identity” in *Complex Entanglements: Art, Globalisation and Cultural Difference*, Nikos Papastergiadis (ed.) (London, Sydney, Chicago: Rivers Oram Press, 2003), 123.

<sup>16</sup> An exhibition organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2001 entitled *010101: Art in Technological Times*, attempts to provide a snapshot of contemporary art and artists engaged with new and old digital technologies.

<sup>17</sup> Beryl Graham and Sara Cook, “Rethinking Curating – Contexts, Practices, and Processes” in *Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: The MIT Press, 2010), 154.

the internet is my conduit to showcasing new work to a much more diverse, international audience, where there are no limits to visitation numbers as there is no official closing date. Notions of access for visiting and seeing an art exhibition in a museum change from considering elements like physical geography, road maps and GPS availability to incorporating elements like free wifi, a computer and proficiency with digital environments. My role as curator is also challenged within this realm, where I might be considered as more like a 'node,' as Graham and Cook suggest, where I am distributing not just the art, but also the process (such as audio description, artist interviews etc.) Most importantly, within this virtual platform, I am not only learning from the artists with whom I work, but also from the audience that encounters this project, specifically through the blog that is linked to the site. Like French philosopher Jacques Ranciere suggests through his notions of spectator emancipation, where it is the spectator that wields more agency, the future of the museum and the place that the disabled artist has within it rests in the hands of a discerning public.<sup>18</sup> Through *Crippling Cyberspace*, the public is equipped to translate their encounters with disability from multi-modal, 'multi-able' experiences, which is more layered than ever before. This visitor no longer has to be physically present with an object in order to benefit from the artist's ideas. In this way, it is the spectator in collaboration with the curator and the artist, which 'disables' the museum most effectively.

### **Digitizing Disability Aesthetics**

This section explores how digitizing disability within a virtual exhibition platform becomes a critical resource for artists by examining the particularities of each artwork in *Crippling Cyberspace*. Disability studies scholar Tobin Siebers speaks of how "disability acquires

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<sup>18</sup> Jacques Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009).

aesthetic value because it represents for makers of art a critical resource for thinking about what a human being is.”<sup>19</sup> Siebers is attempting to theorize representations of disability in modern art from a historical framework, essentially arguing that a ‘disability aesthetic’ was always already present as a type of ‘guerilla’ critical concept in aesthetic representations.<sup>20</sup> I hope to extend Siebers’ ideas by suggesting that digital space offers artists the possibilities for not only expanding, altering and re-framing representations of disabled corporeality in the contemporary moment, moving towards definitions of complex embodiment as a type of ‘disability aesthetic,’ but digital space also gives artists new opportunities for engaging in ‘access’ and ‘dissensus,’ according to Jacques Ranciere’s construction of the term. In other words, Siebers’ ideas of ‘disability aesthetics’ are extended by the contemporary artists in *Crippling Cyberspace* as they fold digital practices into their artmaking, alongside disrupting sensory perceptions and ideas of access.

In focusing now on the work of each artist in more detail, Katherine Araniello has created SBC – Sick, Bitch, Crip. In Araniello’s, words, “SBC is a guise and a persona that has a voice and an inflated personality. She is a super crip, one person; she has a blog; she has a presence on Facebook; she uploads films to YouTube.”<sup>21</sup> She demands to be visible, placing herself anywhere she can within the social media, digital images and short film.” SBC’s latest development is that she has now multiplied into three, Sick, Bitch and Crip. Araniello aims to create frameworks that challenge and alter preconceptions. This is done through subversive humour and presenting disability in fresh discourses. Araniello’s strategic insistence on using cyberspace as a critical

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<sup>19</sup> Tobin Siebers, “Introducing Disability Aesthetics” in *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 2

<sup>21</sup> To read and learn more about Araniello’s blog on “Disability Arts Online” visit <http://www.disabilityartsonline.org.uk/katherine-araniello-blog?item=1591>

and visible stage for showcasing her SBC persona and disability politics takes advantage of its pervasive hold and effect on mainstream society.

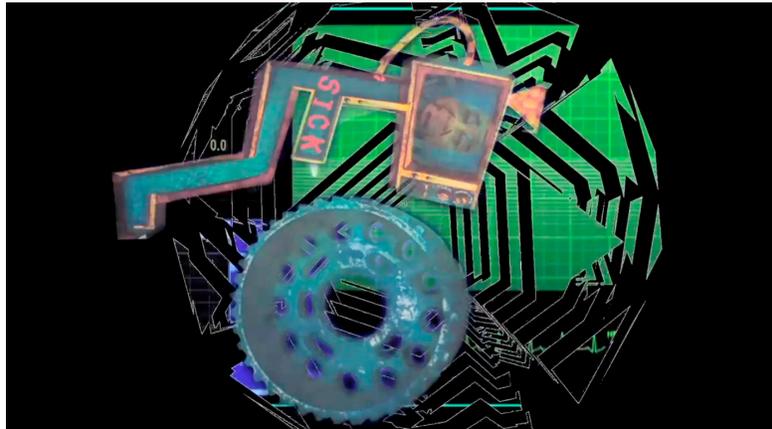


Figure 1: Katherine Araniello, *Sick Bitch Crip Dance*, 2013, music video screen shot. Full descriptions of this image and others in the work are available in this issue, in MP3, HTML, and PDF formats.

What are some of the outcomes of her inescapable online presence for disability politics and how might Araniello's access and mobility evolve through such repeated online exchange? For *Crippling Cyberspace*, Araniello has created a new music video MP4 file entitled *Sick Bitch Crip Dance*, 2013, where the artist has used stop animation in Final Cut Pro and Photoshop as a means to animate her three dancing avatars or personas. The dance music was sourced on a free website and then mixed in Garage Band. The lyrics in the sound track are used as subtitles within the video, such as "Iconic Wheelchair Bound Living Miracle" or the pulsating "S" "B" "C" in rhythm with the beat of the music. The artist has used the framework of a music video in order to convey the artist's personal feelings about finding a certain type of mobile freedom in cyberspace, because it is here that she can effectively dance more imaginatively and without constraints. She says, "in cyberspace there are no physical barriers therefore representation on disability creates a new refreshing discourse, i.e. a wheelchair can fly and movement is

different.”<sup>22</sup> Araniello also feels as though barriers that people might face in interacting with real disabled people, such as their feelings of fear, absurd misconceptions or lack of personal encounters are eradicated in cyberspace, as this is a platform that is accessible in terms of encounter and multi-modal engagement. It is interesting that Araniello uses the music video as a platform in which to critique popular culture and its views on disabled people, given that the public are used to seeing stereotypical figures of so-called beauty, sexiness and perfection. Araniello also creates a complex and engaging collage of pop culture paraphernalia within her three alter egos that are subversive representations of disability that are meant to shock, titillate and poke fun at the medical and social models of disability: ‘Sick’ is ensconced in a wheelchair – the universal symbol of disability who appears to have a black face within a TV-screen-shaped head with a plastic feeding tube perched on top (adding racial complexities to intersectional identity politics). ‘Sick’ is then disengaged from her wheelchair to dance to the beat of the music. ‘Bitch’ is a Barbie look-alike amputee, with one leg made up of an engine pump and stiletto, and one prosthesis arm in the form of a gun. Blazing cigarettes emerge from each of her nipples. ‘Crip’ has a wheelchair made up completely of junk food, including McDonald’s. ‘Crip’ is therefore a junk food junkie, who lives her unhealthy lifestyle as a disabled person proudly and to spite the medical establishment who are trying to make her ‘normal’ and ‘healthy.’ So while Araniello’s characters look disabled and are disabled, they actually move around in a unique way, and the music video platform within this virtual realm gives them this freedom to be unusually mobile.

Calling herself an ethnographer of disability experience, Cassandra Hartblay has contributed the *Do You like this Installation?*, an interactive art project that has both online

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<sup>22</sup> Katherine Araniello, interview with curator, September 8, 2013

([www.doyoulikethisinstallation.com](http://www.doyoulikethisinstallation.com)) and material interfaces. It is composed of three components: (1) a material installation in a gallery space, (2) an interactive online interface and (3) data analysis. The project grows out of 11 months of fieldwork regarding social inclusion and disability in the city of Petrozavodsk in northwestern Russia, particularly as manifested in a disabled person's uneven access to the internet and voting, and access to physical space. While Hartblay was in Petrozavodsk, she developed a community blog and photo archive of all the places that are accessible and inaccessible in the city. On her return to the US, Hartblay wanted to explore both the politics of public space in Russia versus the US, in addition to exploring the differences with voting in real time and online, given that so much of her interaction with the Russian community took place online. Hartblay's ethnographic observations from field work have then been re-worked into the *Do You Like This Installation?* project using what she calls a "simplified, clean interface in the idiom of contemporary art."<sup>23</sup> The material installation in a gallery space, to be launched in fall, 2013, is the first aspect of the project, where Hartblay has built new accessible and inaccessible objects and forms to mimic the physical barriers she came across in Russia (see *fig. 2*). Objects include ramps, ladders, step stools, and pedestals of all shapes and sizes. The artist has placed the 'Yes' and 'No' voting boxes on top or in and amongst these various objects that have the words 'Vote' placed on their surfaces, with an arrow pointing to the where the voting boxes are placed. The artist is interested in observing how people engage with these objects in order to physically get close to the voting box to place their ballot, where they must decide if they like this installation? She has made access to the boxes intentionally both difficult and easy depending on if the visitor is disabled or non-disabled, triggering different levels of frustration and anxiety, and the arrangement will likely change every few days to

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<sup>23</sup> Cassandra Hartblay, Skye interview with Amanda Cachia, September 9, 2013

determine different methods of exchange between object and user on a given day during the installation. Her installation aims to chart how people might navigate or redesign physical and virtual terrain through the voting process, and how they manipulate various access tools in order to get them from point A to B. She is also instigating a type of public anthropology or performance ethnography, where as she says, “lay people are interacting in the process of knowledge creation rather than just being interviewed.”<sup>24</sup>

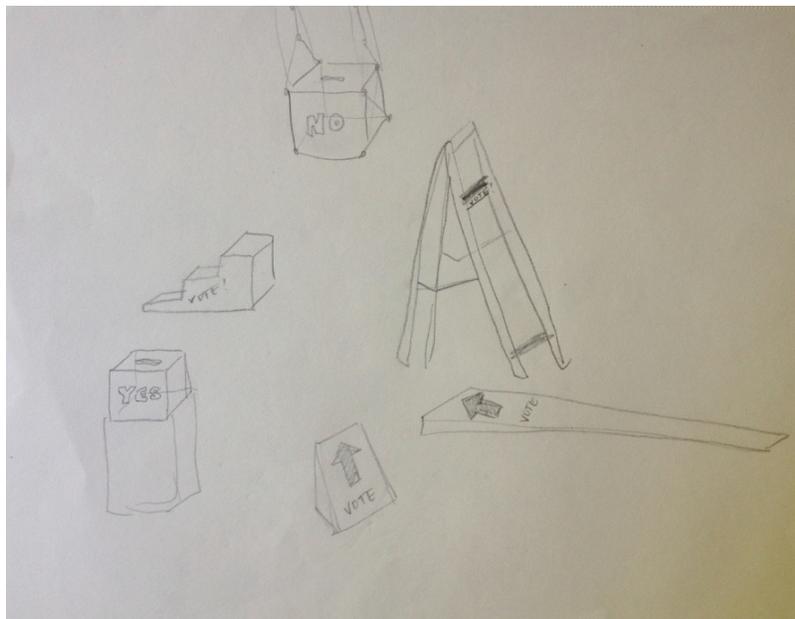


Figure 2: A sketch of Cassandra Hartblay’s objects in her material installation, where visitors are required to navigate in and around the objects in order to vote ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’ Full descriptions of this image and others in the work are available in this issue, in MP3, HTML, and PDF formats.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

ballot  
\*\*\*|  
DO YOU LIKE THIS  
INSTALLATION?  
\*\*\*\*\*  
*drop your ballot in the  
appropriate box to cast your  
vote.*  
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project website: <http://doyoulikethisinstallation.web.unc.edu/>

Figure 3: A ballot from Cassandra Hartblay's installation. The ballot contains only text: "Ballot. Do You Like This Installation? Drop your ballot in the appropriate box to cast your vote." Full descriptions of this image and others in the work are available in this issue, in MP3, HTML, and PDF formats.

There will also be a form of discreet/indiscreet surveillance in the gallery space, where viewers can observe how people interact with the objects in the *Do You Like This Installation?* 'Live Stream' tab, adding more complications to the notion of access, permission and control. Finally, visitors in the material installation will have the option to register their votes online, (prompting the question, is voting online more accessible than voting in the material installation?), in addition to people who cannot visit the physical site of the gallery, but must rely on the virtual realm instead to vote (see *fig. 3*).

Project Interface  
*Do You Like This Installation?*

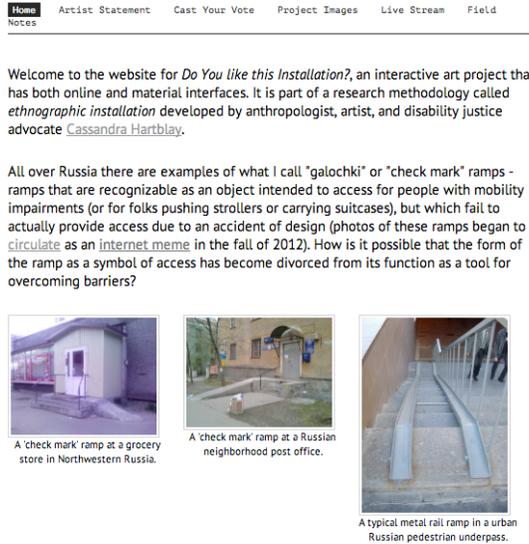


Figure 4: Cassandra Hartblay, *Do You Like This Installation?* 2013, website screen shot. Full descriptions of this image and others in the work are available in this issue, in MP3, HTML, and PDF formats.

Within her 'Field Notes' tab on the website, Hartblay is interested in exploring the following critical questions within her tongue-in-cheek data collection strategy: What might these interactions tell us about disabled and non-disabled habits of exchange, mobility and access within the physical and virtual world? "How is crip movement in cyberspace intertwined with barriers and access in the material world? What are the interdependencies of embodied and cybernetic access? How might the design of election processes preclude or proffer particular results? How might voters foil these biases? What can crip perspectives tell us about the politics of participation, understood as disabled and non-disabled movement in and between the physical and virtual worlds?"<sup>25</sup> Ultimately, Hartblay is interested in learning if the online interface is more enabling than physical space, and if the ease for design and re-design in both spaces

<sup>25</sup> Cassandra Hartblay artist statement, 2013

changes depending on one's embodiment and one's access to technology? These questions around control, access, mobility and technology continue to circulate within this complex, layered installation that crosses over both the physical and virtual spheres. Finally, Hartblay acknowledges that in her initial observations of her project, it is difficult to intentionally design inaccessibility within her conceptual and philosophical framework as a disability project activist.<sup>26</sup> It will be interesting to observe what happens next.

On display on Sara Hendren's *Slope : Intercept* website, [www.slopeintercept.org](http://www.slopeintercept.org) the artist has built a suite of five small-scale, portable ramps. Hendren says, "Blurring the lines between skateboarders, wheelchair users, social and useful architectures, I uncouple this iconic technology from its regular assignments, and instead I pose its physics as a site of play, of modular invention, of virtuoso wheeled performances—some by bodies that are legibly performative, and others whose performances are frequently hidden or marginalized."<sup>27</sup> In co-existence with this online database of ramps is Hendren's new work for *Crippling Cyberspace*, the equally playful *Slope : Audio* (2013), a two minutes and 20 seconds sound collage. This is the artist's first attempt at creating an audio version of her ramps project <http://slopeintercept.org/slope-audio/> (see *fig. 4*), and she has enjoyed the process of taking the ramps to a new multi-sensorial and multi-modal level. She maintains that while her digital archive of ramps as a corollary to the material design of physical ramps is important, it is now time for her to think more conceptually about the ramped space online, and who gets to benefit from accessing this virtual experience. Through challenging herself to think about how critical access tools can truly become more engaging, alternate forms of experience through *Crippling Cyberspace*, the artist has expanded her practice to the aural form. Additionally, Hendren found

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<sup>26</sup> Cassandra Hartblay Skype interview with Amanda Cachia, September 9, 2013

<sup>27</sup> Sara Hendren artist statement, 2013

it interesting to explore aural experiences of other “wheeled mobility,” as she calls it, such as skateboards, bicycles, wheeled luggage and “idiosyncratic, small, wheeled gear that you see being pushed through space.”<sup>28</sup> Hendren’s phenomenology of the ramp was heightened through how bodies move on skateboards or the way that hands maneuver a wheelchair. Hendren’s articulations of resistance, acceleration, “rampedness” become a different bodied experience through sound as a companion to image.<sup>29</sup>

Hendren located her various found sounds through Freesound.org, which is a large repository of sounds, in addition to sounds from instructional skate-boarding videos off YouTube, filtered through the fair use policy. The artist also developed her own copy that described some of the ramps in her *Slope : Intercept* archive. She sourced the various voices that can be heard in the piece from different frameworks, so that historical, political and social perspectives gelled together into one continuous sound montage pulled together on Avid. Voices in the work (with various accents) range from skate-boarding tips from an professional skateboarder and instructor, such as “So when you’re crossing, have a really good look at exactly what you’re gonna be wheeling over.”<sup>30</sup> A physics professor’s voice says, “So the mass of this block is equal to M. And it’s sitting on this – you could view this as an inclined plane, or a ramp, or some type of wedge.”<sup>31</sup> Ultimately though, the artist was mostly interested in the narrow focus of the somatic experience of the ramp, especially around the mastery and trickery of skateboarding itself.

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<sup>28</sup> Sara Hendren Skype interview with Amanda Cachia, September 9, 2013

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Sara Hendren, Sound transcript for *Slope : Audio*, 2013

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

## SLOPE : AUDIO

MENU ▾
ACCELERATIONS
TRANSVERSALS
DIMINUTIVES
VANTAGES
ABOUT
SUITE OF 5, BOSTON (2013)
SLOPE : AUDIO

In September 2013, *Slope : Intercept* is part of *Crippling Cyberspace*, an exhibition that's one sector of the Common Pulse festival and co-sponsored by the *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*.

Thus far, my project has partly addressed the alternate access made possible by the ramp: wheeled mobility for politics and for leisure, as a social object and as a means of cultural participation. For *Crippling Cyberspace*, I'm engaging new possibilities for the "alt text" to accompany the images in my growing [collection of the inclined plane](#). The collection has until now been exclusively designed for *viewing*—for taking an ordinary object and seeing it in new forms, new contexts, making affinities between ramps in unlikely places. But what about other experiences of the ramp? What does it *feel* like to engage in that acceleration and resistance, the steady glissando movement across a surface instead of the chop-chop-chop of stairs? Who uses that experience, and for what ends?

In its typical form, "alt-text" is a prose description that usually provides text-to-speech or screen reader access to digital spaces online for non-sighted users. So this sound file is, in a way, modeled on that kind of description. But I want this sound piece to push the sensory estrangement that is the heart of the project overall: an invitation to experience this ubiquitous material structure again, but without only "visioning" it by the material design and its juxtaposition in images online. Here a set of aural sources, woven together, invokes the somatic experience of the ramp. Describing both its phenomenology as a physical force and the bodied experiences of ramp users, this sound file is an experiment in a truly alternate text: not a literal translation, but something else altogether.



Figure 5: Sara Hendren, *Slope : Audio*, 2013, website screen shot. Full descriptions of this image and others in the work are available in this issue, in MP3, HTML, and PDF formats.

This focus includes Hendren's fascination with the interesting audio descriptions derived from people using their own wheelchairs – she says, “you can hear their own breathing and their own effort through space...”<sup>32</sup> The action of gravity became a stimulating plethora of sounds for the artist, who wanted to foreground this for the listener first and foremost, layered with the physics and mechanics of ramps themselves. Moving forward, the artist is compelled to further explore the machinations of what the ramp would be in digital vernacular terms. Similar to how Hartblay is keen to purposefully action inaccessible spaces and places, Hendren will uncover how to deform and alter the movement of simply clicking through cyberspace, moving beyond any literal translation of web-based content. For her, the “aesthetics of access” remains an “unexplored terrain” where the opportunity to think more holistically about an online experience – rather than translation – is open to investigation.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Sara Hendren Skype interview with Amanda Cachia, September 9, 2013

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

Montreal in/accessible collective (m.i.a.), composed of four Canadian artists and researchers, namely Arseli Dokumaci, Antonia Hernández, Laurence Parent and Kim Sawchuk, has created the first of a series of virtual posters on <http://mia.mobilities.ca/posters/index3.html> that, in the collective's words, explore "the 'spatial enunciations' of the urban environment in relationship to the barriers, simultaneously physical and virtual, which prohibit people with disabilities from participating in civic life, on and off line."<sup>34</sup> The collective work from the home base Mobile Media Lab located in the Department of Communication Studies at Concordia University in Montreal. The collective also presents their work as process and performance, as "media in action" – which is another meaning attributed to their acronym. They continue to say in their artist statement: "From 'missing in action' to 'media in action,' this assemblage of networks, devices, platforms and formats, which constitutes cyberspace, can be deployed to disrupt the 'able-ist' value systems and discourses that haunt its virtual corridors."<sup>35</sup>

The virtual posters, or ViPs, essentially provide portals into the various media content the collective have created over the past few years. The collective suggest that the posters produced can be reproduced in print, but they live most comfortably in 'cyberspace': that is, they are hyperlinked, contain animations, and are connected to projects produced by the m.i.a collective that are networked. The collective also state that the posters are "meant to circulate, make the rounds, are amenable to different 'platforms' from Facebook to Twitter to Instagram to YouTube to Vimeo, and are subject to change over time."<sup>36</sup> In this way, the goal of the ViP series is to show the links between the real and the virtual, but also between media genres from different

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<sup>34</sup> m.i.a. collective artist statement, 2013

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

epochs and eras. They also mean to take ‘crip action’ which means to ‘disable’ the system much like my curatorial is to ‘crip’ or ‘disable’ the museum.

For *Crippling Cyberspace*, the first of what will be a series of posters is entitled *Virtual Poster Series, ViP #1: Traffic Lights* (2013) (see *fig. 5*). Each color of a traffic light – red, yellow, green, is presented in the poster as a row of squares in a triptych, where if the user places their cursor over any of the colored boxes, a quick animated sequence of related imagery will flash over the square, and end with a word related to the content in the box that the user will discover once they click on it (see *fig. 6*). Conceptually, the traffic lights symbolize another type of, as Kim Sawchuk says, “technological device that controls the movement and flow of people, cars, machines, bicycles.”<sup>37</sup> Who stops, who starts and who yields within these physical and virtual spaces in application to disabled corporeality?

In more detail, the red box, titled *Architectural Ableism* is the set of five video capsules that were co-produced by the m.i.a. collective in collaboration with the activist group, RAPLIQ. The collective says that five different locations were identified in the city of Montreal, in order to “detail the ways that movement through these spaces has been laid out. In many cases, access is promised but not delivered.”<sup>38</sup> Only five minutes each, the capsules contain interviews in French (with English sub-titles) that uncover how inaccessible wheelchair encounters in public space cause anxiety and frustration for their users.

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<sup>37</sup> m.i.a. collective Skype interview with Amanda Cachia, September 18, 2013

<sup>38</sup> m.i.a. artist statement, 2013



Figure 6: m.i.a.'s *Virtual Poster Series ViP #1: Traffic Lights*, 2013, screen shot. Full descriptions of this image and others in the work are available in this issue, in MP3, HTML, and PDF formats.

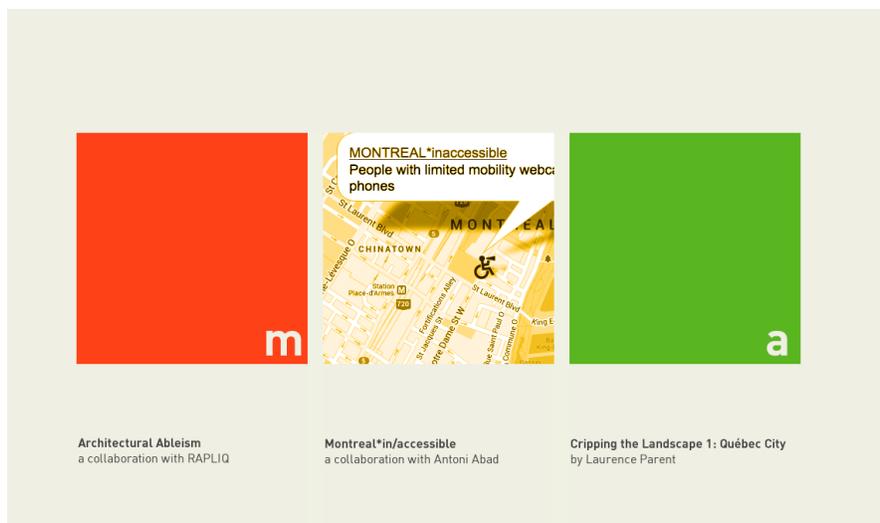


Figure 7: m.i.a.'s *Virtual Poster Series ViP #1: Traffic Lights*, 2013, screen shot of cursor scrolled over yellow traffic light. Full descriptions of this image and others in the work are available in this issue, in MP3, HTML, and PDF formats.

The m.i.a. collective now plan to provide French sub-titles for these video capsules in the future, in addition to making them accessible for hearing and visually impaired viewers. The red traffic light for this series of works of course symbolizes inaccessibility – stop, there is no way in, but the collective also turn the red stop sign into an activist chant – “Stop Ableism.”

The yellow box presents the participation of the collective in Barcelona, artist Antoni Abad's *megafone project*. For the past year, a group of disabled participants have been engaged in mapping and photographing the city of Montreal, pointing out its barriers that also suggest a very unwelcoming exterior – slow down, we can't let you in here, hence the significance of the yellow traffic light signifier. The m.i.a. collective say that “the maps make visible the profound inhabitability of our cities for those with physical disabilities. To date, over 2000 contributions to the maps have been made by eight participants. As this is a user-generated project, the map thickens and changes regularly.”<sup>39</sup> Within this website, miniature blue international wheelchair symbols are littered across a digital world map to indicate the points in which a disabled person has come across a physical barrier. The wheelchair symbol ‘character’ is holding a red megaphone to make public and more visible the injustice of this inequitable access point (see *fig. 7*). So once again, the collective have destabilized the signification of the yellow traffic symbol as if to say, ‘slow down, we are watching you and we are exposing you.’ The collective add that this project is an “open source vehicle for social change.”<sup>40</sup>

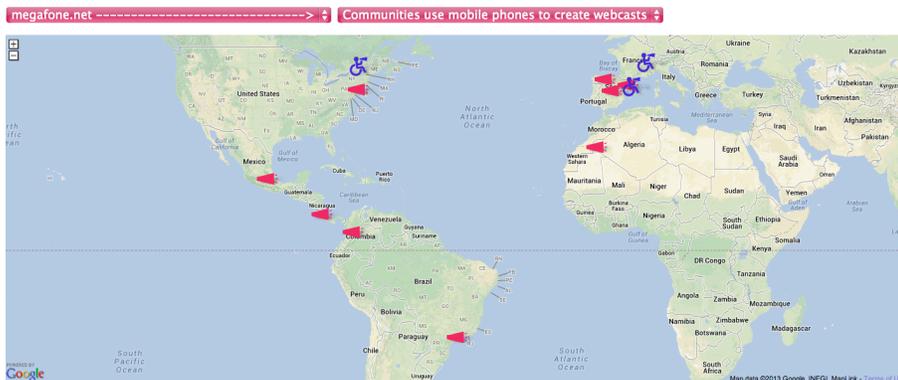


Figure 8: m.i.a and Atoni Abad, *megafone project*, 2012, website screen shot. Full descriptions of this image and others in the work are available in this issue, in MP3, HTML, and PDF formats.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

The final box – the green traffic light – contains a new 13 minute video work filmed and edited by one of the m.i.a. collective members, Laurence Parent, entitled *Crippling the Landscape 1: Québec City*, (May 23, 2013). Parent has decided to use a “herocam” to chart her thirty-five journey on foot from the University of Laval to the train station in Québec City, which was a distance of five kilometers (see *fig. 8*), “told from the point of view of my wheelchair,” she says.<sup>41</sup>



Figure 9: Laurence Parent, *Crippling the Landscape 1: Québec City*, May 23, 2013, website screen shot. Full descriptions of this image and others in the work are available in this issue, in MP3, HTML, and PDF formats.

In this intimate narrative, Parent exposes the dangers, barriers and inaccessible points encountered throughout her journey. Echoing the title of the virtual exhibition itself, *Crippling the Landscape* attempts to provide not only a unique phenomenology of urban space viewed through the lens of Parent’s wheelchair embodiment, but the artist also tries to “impair the functioning of ableism...and make defective the structures of power which contribute to reinforcing normalcy in ableist architecture.”<sup>42</sup> The green light now provokes notions of full agency wielded by the disabled person, who takes control of the camera as she ‘goes’ and guides us, the viewer, into her world of barriers. The green light is also of course evocative of the

<sup>41</sup> Laurence Parent artist statement, 2013, <http://mia.mobilities.ca/cripping-the-landscape/>

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

landscape. The visceral connection between ‘cripping cyberspace’ and ‘cripping the landscape’ here is where the landscape is represented digitally through Parent’s video camera as prosthesis, which we can only then watch through technology and through cyberspace. Of this work, Kim Sawchuk says that the camera “becomes a prosthesis to give you the sensation not only of the body, but of the body in relation to the technology, in relation to the road, in relationship to all the points of possibility of movement...”<sup>43</sup> Parent’s crip intervention is also an appropriation of technologies.

In thinking about the effective/affective work in *Crippling Cyberspace* as a unified group, Ranciere’s model of aesthetic rupture or ‘dissensus,’ is most useful, where he describes ‘dissensus’ as “a conflict between sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it, or between several sensory regimes and/or ‘bodies’.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, the art is *Crippling Cyberspace* is creating a rupture between how the senses are normally perceived and received so that our understanding of disabled bodies shifts. Similarly, Ranciere identifies a so-called sensory rupture for the eye in gazing upon forms that contrast with its own ways of making sense of what it sees before it. I argue that this approach works well for addressing the politics of disabled bodies and their atypical forms in art, and especially here in *Crippling Cyberspace*. Ranciere says that “politics breaks with the sensory self-evidence of the ‘natural’ order that destines specific groups and individuals to occupy positions of rule or of being ruled, assigning them to public or private lives, pinning them down to a certain time and space, to specific ‘bodies’, that is to specific ways of being, seeing and saying.”<sup>45</sup> Politics – disabled politics, in the current discussion – invents “new ways of making sense of the sensible” so that there are new

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<sup>43</sup> m.i.a. collective Skype interview with Amanda Cachia, September 18, 2013

<sup>44</sup> Jacques Ranciere “The Paradoxes of Political Art” in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), 139.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

configurations between the visible and the invisible, the audible and the inaudible, “new distributions of space and time – in short, new bodily capacities.”<sup>46</sup> Disabled politics in aesthetics creates a ‘dissensual’ commonsense, offering alternative ways of being embodied and of seeing bodies. As scholar Shannon Jackson notes, Ranciere argues for “the necessity of questioning the categorical divisions and binary oppositions that govern an aesthetic ‘distribution of the sensible.’ A radically equalizing vision dismantles analytic polarities that divide activity from passivity, stasis from duration, use from contemplation, image from reality, artist from audience, object from surround, individual from community.”<sup>47</sup> Within this radically equalizing vision, I argue that Araniello, Hartblay, Hendren and the m.i.a. collective have used virtual space to participate in art practices that dismantle and rupture any previous binaries or polarities, in collaboration with myself as curator and you, the spectator.

Finally, the artists are transforming perceptions of disability through this virtual platform. As we already understand from N. Katherine Hayles’ scholarship, virtual space is not disembodied.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, disability inhabits virtual space as much as physical space, and the artists do not pretend to leave their embodiment behind. In fact, their work is quite the antithesis of this, as they highlight the political and performative possibilities of cyberspace for disabled subjectivity. From Araniello’s dancing avatars spinning and twirling upside down, sideways and in circles, to Hendren’s affective embodied sounds and sounds of bodies, and the phenomenology of gliding and wheeling across ramps, Hartblay’s field notes on how visitors move through her simultaneous material and cybernetic interfaces in the act of voting, or m.i.a.’s

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Shannon Jackson, “Quality Time” in *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), 53.

<sup>48</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, “Essay” in *Immersed in Technology: Art and Virtual Environments*, ed. Mary Anne Moser (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 1996).

traffic lights interface as a portal into several collaborative digital projects, such as tracking inaccessible locations in public space across a world map (Abadi's *megafone* project), or exploring the phenomenology of urban space through the lens of a wheelchair user's digital camera, where technological and physical spaces merge (Laurence Parent's *Crippling the Landscape*), the disabled body is 'mobilized' like never before, both metaphorically and literally. The art work as separate entities within the construct of *Crippling Cyberspace* on the CJDS website also reminds us that while virtual space might give an artist, curator and audience the opportunity to design, question and destabilize power and control in the real world, especially as it relates to disability, cyberspace does not eradicate it. It simply re-distributes power and control in other ways, some more effective than others. Within the context of *Crippling Cyberspace* at least, it is Araniello, Hartblay, Hendren and the m.i.a. collective that get to wield control and agency, taking over one issue of CJDS (with permission) to share not only their disability politics, but also how cyberspace and technology helps them express it uniquely and definitively.

### **Curating Creative Access**

Integral to this rupturing process is the 'Audio Description' feature of the *Crippling Cyberspace* exhibition issue, where sensory regimes are altered. Apart from requiring that each artist grapple with the exhibition thesis, I asked them to record audio descriptions (sometimes called verbal imaging) for their own artworks as a means for visually impaired or blind visitors to experience their digital work. They used the free online voice recorder, [www.vocaroo.com](http://www.vocaroo.com) in order to create flexible MP3 files of their descriptions. The audio also comes with a written script, or a transcript, of that description. In special application to Hendren's audio work, I asked her to provide a written transcript of the sounds and dialogue in her audioscape/collage as an

access point for deaf people. My directive had several-pronged outcomes. First, audio description as conventional and sensorial mode of access that is occasionally found in a museum setting (note its distinctive difference from audio guides) functions as a dynamic tool for interpretation and communication on the *Crippling Cyberspace* website. But second, it also effectively becomes independent works of art in themselves, which carries its own weight and space in this virtual crip architecture. This is because the audio description becomes an extension of the artists' work, where the artist is made more aware of thinking critically about a fuller spectrum of audiences, and how they might access their art beyond the ocular. This is especially true for artists who might identify with a particular disability, but who neglect to think beyond the implications and challenges of their own embodiment. One might mistakenly assume that artists with disabilities are one large, homogenized and unified group, but like other minority groups, there are silos and divisions within various disabilities too. Recording audio description might also offer the artist a richer and more complex means in which to think about their art-making process, adding new dialogical layers to a work that is predominantly visual or aural.

On a number of occasions now, when I've invited the artist to participate in audio description for their own work, they react with anxiety or trepidation, even nervousness. These reactions are evidently bound up with worrying about the 'right' way to execute it. They might ask questions like, how much description should I provide for each image or frame in a video? How do I describe color? What are the most important pieces of information in an image that need to be conveyed verbally for a blind person? How should the temporal aspects of a video be communicated, if a video is collaged and cut up in a complicated form? Is there a right way and/or a wrong way to communicate the pace of my voice? From my sparse but powerful experiences engaging with audio description in the past two years, I have learnt that translation is

personal, subjective and performative and that information can also be lost and gained within each step, so I try and encourage the artists through this process and way of thinking. For example, Katherine Araniello, who had never created an audio description before, initially expressed concern about developing one, but then ended up really engaging in the process in a powerful way.<sup>49</sup> She said she found it stimulating because it was different from describing her art in a conceptual way. Following is an excerpt from her lively and detailed audio script:

White text reads INFLATED EGO DREAMS OF BEING CRIPPLED. A front facing female, standing up, moves up and down and side to side in the centre of the screen. Both eyes are looking to the right and have make-up on. Block black eyebrows and block red lips. Her cheeks are blotchy white. Her hair is bright lime green, goes down to her bottom and has thick black lines. Her torso is pink and her breasts are made of light pink fur with one cigarette coming out of each breast pointing forward. Her left arm points outwards and is made of an AK47 silver gun. Her right arm and hand is large pink plastic pointing outwards. Her fingers are straight. Her left leg is a gold piston with pink font that reads BITCH. Her other leg is a green splint with straps and is attached to a high heel black boot.<sup>50</sup>

Similarly, and yet differently, in Hendren's written transcript of her sound work, *Slope : Audio*, the artist determines useful, yet creative vocabulary around the visceral sounds of skateboarders, wheeler luggage and wheelchairs moving up and down ramps. She begins by writing:

Fade in with wheel sounds on pavements. There are weighted wheels, grinding against the surfaces of concrete and brick, bicycle wheels and their light buzz of gears, the faint ring of a bicycle bell. Squeaking wheels, turning. Layers of larger and smaller wheels.<sup>51</sup>

She concludes her script with, "Wheels eclipse the sound of the voice, ascending, accelerating, growing louder, and then gone."<sup>52</sup> As Araniello's and Hendren's prose demonstrates, audio

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<sup>49</sup> I did offer each of the artists with some online templates as a guide for how to create audio description, ranging from examples of exhibitions like <http://exhibits.haverford.edu/whatcanabodydo/media/> and <http://www.blindatthemuseum.com> to industry standards generated by non-profit organizations like Art Beyond Sight in New York City: <http://www.artbeyondsight.org/handbook/acs-verbalsamples.shtml>

<sup>50</sup> Katherine Araniello, transcript of audio description, August, 2013

<sup>51</sup> Sara Hendren, transcript for *Slope : Audio*, 2013

description and transcription might be an industry and an established means of translation, but its rhetorical frameworks are pliable and not fixed to any ideology that might not leave room for inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies, which, win or lose, fail or succeed, all are part of the human experience. If audio description sheds light on the full spectrum of what it means to be human, then it is a powerful technology indeed.

### **Discursive Programming in Cyberspace**

In this final section, I will discuss how the Skype interviews I conducted with each participating artist also formed a critical curatorial component of the discursive programming for *Crippling Cyberspace*, much like the audio description process. Each interview varied in length, ranging from 18 minutes to 40 minutes, and the questions I asked each of the artists were similar and only varied slightly. The questions centered on the artist's ideas around the alternative constraints or possibilities for disabled people in cyberspace and if those barriers or possibilities were different to those presented in physical space. I was also interested in exploring the artists' goals and outcomes for their work using the online platform, and how their own personal ideas of 'mobility' and 'access' may have evolved and changed through this project and their art making process. Finally, I asked them about future directions for the intersection of disability and cyberspace, and if they enjoyed being part of the exhibition. As one might expect, many of the answers to these questions intersected across each of the interviews, and then there were many moments of clear divergence.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

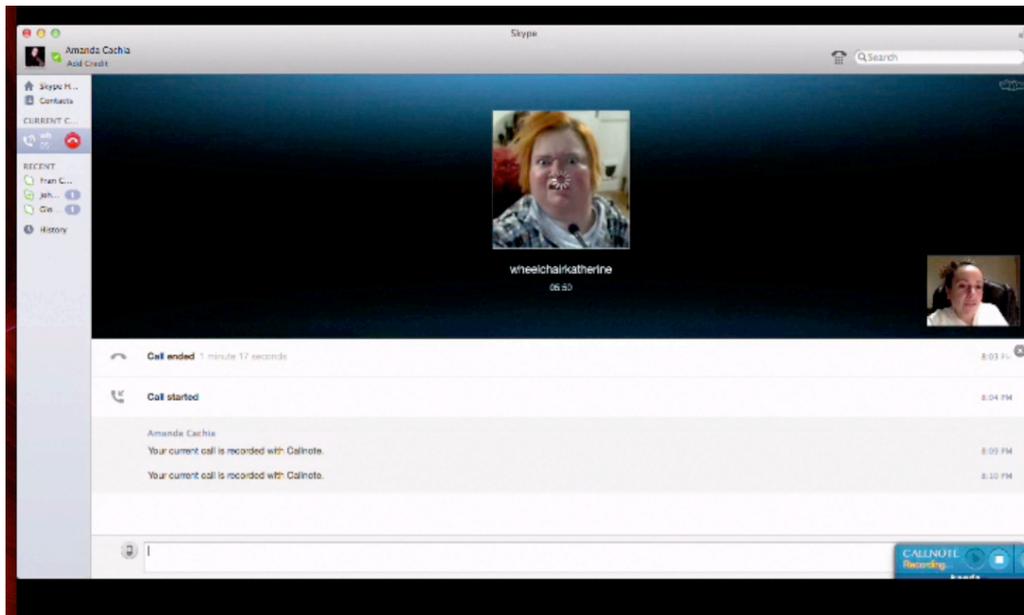


Figure 10: Screen shot of the Skype interface interview with Katherine Araniello conducted by Amnda Cachia, September 8, 2013. Full descriptions of this image and others in the work are available in this issue, in MP3, HTML, and PDF formats.

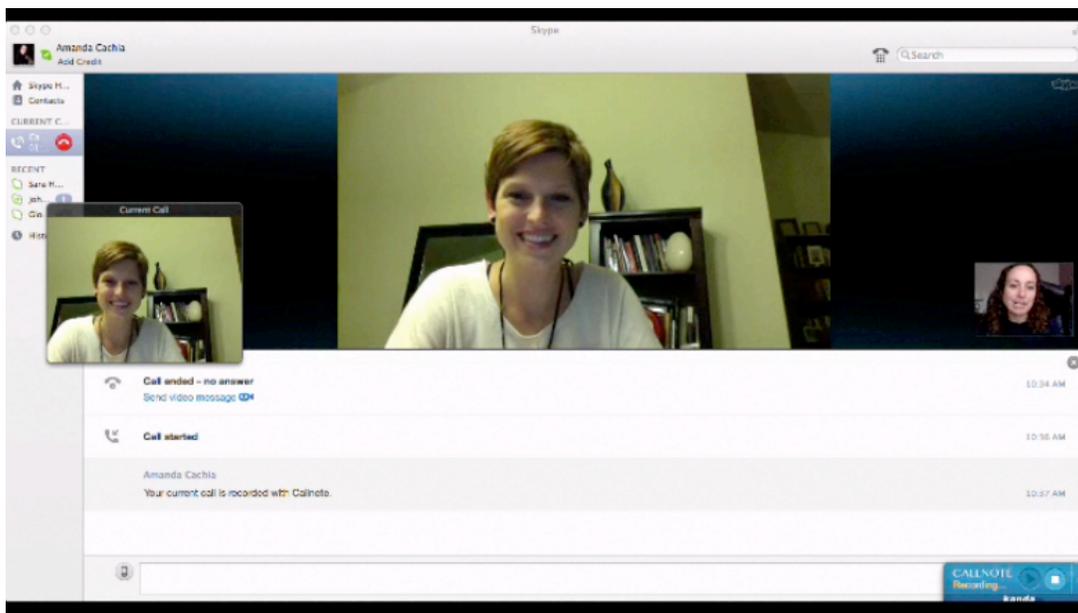


Figure 11: Screen shot of the skype interface interview with Cassandra Hartblay conducted by Amnda Cachia, September 9, 2013. Full descriptions of this image and others in the work are available in this issue, in MP3, HTML, and PDF formats.

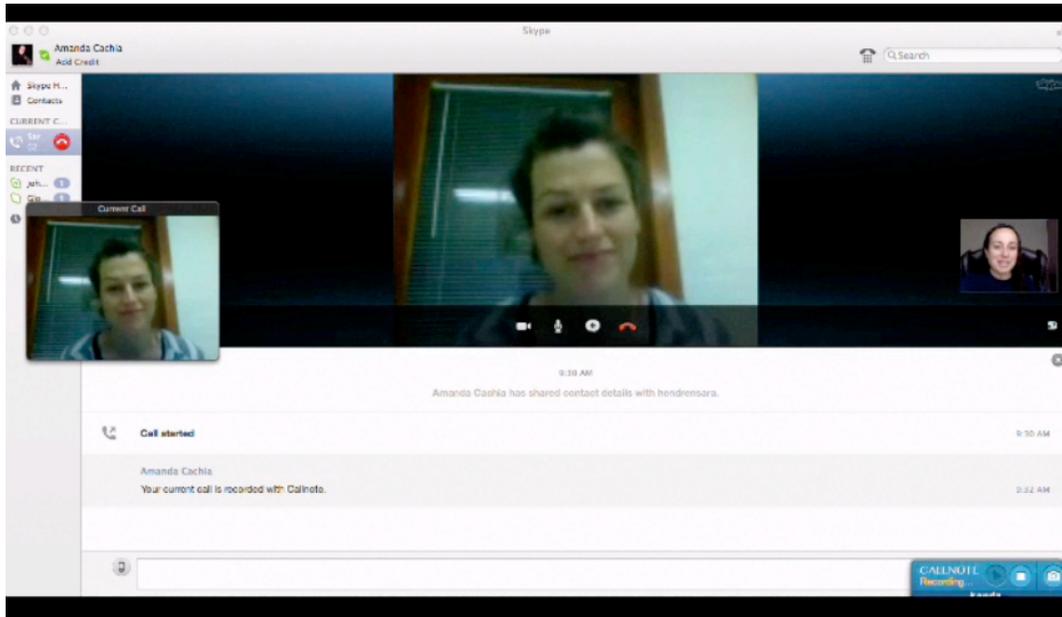


Figure 12: Screen shot of the Skype interface interview with Sara Hendren conducted by Amanda Cachia, September 9, 2013. Full descriptions of this image and others in the work are available in this issue, in MP3, HTML, and PDF formats.

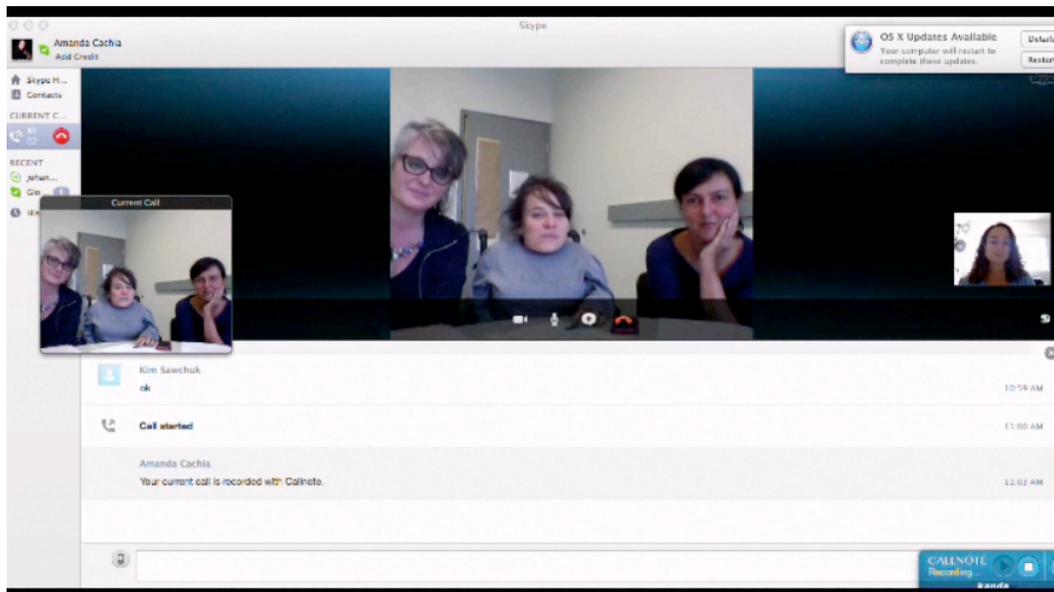


Figure 13: Screen shot of the Skype interface interview with m.i.a. collective (left to right: Kim Sawchuk, Laurence Parent, Arseli Dokumaci) conducted by Amanda Cachia, September 18, 2013. Full descriptions of this image and others in the work are available in this issue, in MP3, HTML, and PDF formats.

Of course, an encounter with a traditional, material exhibition often offers the opportunity to attend and listen to an artist talk, so the Skype artist interviews are ‘exhibited’ as an alternative to this, although I argue they are also on display as a more accessible extension. By this I mean that the interviews were recorded and can now be archived (for as long as the site is maintained) so they offer a multi-modal access point like the virtual exhibition itself, where you no longer have to be physically present in order to enjoy the art, or the interview, as the case may be. I was able to record both the audio and visual components of the interviews through a program entitled *Callnote*, which can be downloaded for free online. Further, the interviews were transcribed by Alexandra Haasgaard, so anyone with a hearing impairment can follow the dialogue. The written transcripts, however, are not a true and exact replica of the audio, given that there were occasions where Haasgaard could not hear the speaker, and could not determine the accurate vocabulary. Instead, she used the word ‘unintelligible’ during times when sound could not be heard and words remain unidentified. This notion of ‘lost in translation’ is important to consider when thinking about what is lost and gained in our communication via various methods of technology.

In *Face-to-Face Communication Over the Internet: Emotions in a Web of Culture, Language and Technology*, editors Arvid Kappas and Nicole C. Kramer discuss the implications of body language, gesture, facial expressions, nonverbal cues and intercultural exchange differences when communicating with others via Skype.<sup>53</sup> The text highlights how communication via the web often involves a new set of skills, language and even facial expression. The internet and virtual space does not simply amplify or project what is taking place in the real world; rather, the cyber domain requires a new set of tools in order to communicate effectively and efficiently. While much of the text focuses on the subtleties and complexities of

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<sup>53</sup> Arvid Kappas and Nicole C. Kramer, *Face-to-Face Communication Over the Internet: Emotions in a Web of Culture, Language and Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

nonverbal cues, body language and gendered social interaction, I'm interested in pushing this conversation further so as to think about what Skype communication looks like and feels like while trying to be accessible to people with various impairments. If we already understand communication to be subjective, and full of inconsistency and *mis*-communication, then working to offer communication to people who have visual and hearing impairments is much the same. Where there are moments when we may have missed or mistaken one word for another, or misinterpreted an emoticon, a similar and perhaps more challenging and creative process is at play during the interpretive mode of communicating – whether this is by Skype or by a professional transcriber. Each spoken, visual or written layer of virtual communication is rich, complex and nuanced, and each form has its own information to offer, so imagine what this becomes when we add more dimensions for those who are hearing impaired or visually impaired? During my Skype interviews for instance, sometimes sound dropped out and I couldn't hear the speaker, or in Katherine's interview, we were unable to activate the video camera, so the viewer will see a still image of the artist's face, rather than her live body responding to my questions, unlike all the other interviews. During the interview with m.i.a. collective, it was a struggle to get all the artists to 'fit' on the one screen, and while this was possible at the beginning of the interview, by the end, the artists seemed to unconsciously desire a much more intimate engagement with the interface of the screen, so their individual faces were drawn in closer to the computer, and they took turns handing the screen/microphone to each artist as they spoke.

I felt it was important to reveal these moments that were lost in translation, to share some of the given characteristics of cyberspace, and how the curatorial process must be flexible and amenable to this framework that may not offer the same clinical environment as the white cube.

Such process adds to the other central aspects of the exhibition itself, which I continue to maintain are equally integral components to the exhibition as form. The website and the various audio tracks, written audio transcriptions and recorded artist Skype interviews give the visitor a plethora of means in which to engage with the work, through multiple perspectives when the encounter this special online issue of the Canadian Journal of Disability Studies. To my mind, these stakeholders only begin to touch on equal access in the physical sense of the word, in addition to how access can and must be incorporated as part of an artist and curator's artistic output.

## **Conclusion**

*Crippling Cyberspace: A Contemporary Virtual Art Exhibition* offers my work as a curator at the intersection of disability and contemporary art practice a welcome opportunity to experiment, and grow in new directions. Digital environments have firmly established a new trajectory in curating, where online exhibitions have become 'open source' and the public, users and participants interact with these curatorial spaces in highly sophisticated ways beyond simply blogs. This paper has suggested that the digital interface more broadly offers a diverse pedagogical, ontological, epistemological and phenomenological horoscope of disability engagement that continues to propel disability studies, curatorial and artistic practice into the future. Through engaging with the variegated ideas of access and discursive programming across multiple tiers, Ranciere's theory of 'dissensus' is unlocked, and the door to Sandell and Dodd's radical museum practice is opened. Furthermore, *Crippling Cyberspace* demonstrates a commitment and a critical contribution to Terry Smith's conception of curator, as one actively engaged in platform-building practice, ensconced in disability politics. In the great reveal of

process and practice in the disabled virtual realm, not only are definitions and misconceptions of disability labored and refined by Araniello, Hartblay, Hendren and the m.i.a. collective, but the work of the curator as infrastructural activist can begin to be implemented. Within an artistic cripistemology of cyberspace, the museum now starts to be 'disabled,' in every 'sense' of that complex word.

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Montreal In/Accessible (m.i.a.) website at  
<http://mia.mobilities.ca/posters/index3.html>

*Slope Intercept* website at  
<http://slopeintercept.org> and sound file at <http://slopeintercept.org/slope-audio/>

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