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Conversation Between Amanda Cachia and Sara Hendren

Amanda Cachia: What do you think are the alternatives, constraints or possibilities for disabled people in cyberspace?

Sara Hendren: Yeah, that's a very interesting question and I think one that people are still fumbling around with a lot. I'm really interested in trying to think about the aesthetics of access as a kind of unexplored terrain, partly because I think the discussion about access has been limited to highly technical kinds of questions for people who are working in web design and the architecture of web development. And I think we could use some artistic and design inquiry around, what are the experiences that we want to have online? And I've heard other users – non-cited users of the web – say that we shouldn't make the goal a kind of literal translation across users with different kinds of modalities and abilities, but rather think about holistic kinds of concerns and about what the experience of the web could be, rather than an accommodation that's overly literalistic. And one has to be careful about all those considerations, but I'm excited about bringing the aesthetic to bear on these questions.

AC: Okay, so leading off of that, how are barriers or possibilities in physical space then different to cyberspace for disabled people?

SH: Right, I mean I think those questions are many. You know, the material space is one that's been explored, had several decades to kind of be looked at by urban planners and engineers and architects. And cyberspace has been fairly conscripted in its development thus far, and in the ways that we use it and the kinds of content that we consume. I think now there are some really interesting multimedia modalities that are coming into the social media space where sound files and audiovisual and other kinds of non-text-based sharing, those are becoming much more user-friendly by laypeople, not by experts, so that's a really promising area. But it is as yet not well imagined, right? Because ultimately, the Internet is a young thing.

AC: Yes, okay. So that then leads I think to the next question. So tell me about Slope: Intercept, and why the ramp has become such an important object of investigation for you?

SH: Yeah, well and it's very germane to these kinds of questions about trying to merge and distinguish and blend together and find the overlaps and the differences among material spaces and digital spaces. So the ramp has long been an icon for cultural access, that is, literal, wheeled mobile access to buildings and infrastructures of all kinds in cities, but also as a kind of metaphor for access to the culture and in politics. But what I wanted to do was to kind of reinvigorate and re-enchant and re-vision entirely the ramp as an iconic form and its history, which is multiple and longstanding. So I did that in a couple of ways. One is in the material design that I made, which is this small suite of five portable, temporary ramps that I think is kind of a cross between temporary architecture and almost a kind of personal prosthetic. They're in that in-between space, because they're about three feet square. So I wanted to think about what happens when a ramp becomes mobile but also it wouldn't be the first temporary ramp of its kind of course. But what happens when a ramp becomes mobile and has a little family of modular pieces that can be conjoined and put together and reconfigured in multiple ways? So one thing I'm harking back to is Galileo's inclined plane, which is a simple machine and it's in his classic taxonomy of simple machines that he codified, including the lever, the pulley, the screw, the wedge and the wheel and axle so put together with the inclined plane those make up a kind of alphabet of modern machinery. And when you look at the history of industrial labour, the inclined plane, which is this very humble, stationary object, the way that it transforms the behaviour of force across a surface is actually machinic and predictable and has been extraordinarily important to our cultural life. I mean, wheelchairs notwithstanding, there's a whole history behind this. So what I wanted to do was to kind of conjoin that industrial importance together with the kind of glissando beautiful movement across the surface of the diagonal that's been deployed in lots of ways in architecture, in the history of architecture, and then to bring it to bear on this profound political question of access for wheelchair users. But not only that, there's another political use of ramp that I brought to bear in the project and that is the ramp for skateboarders. And so this whole family of wooden ramps that I've designed and they attach side-by-side, they stack and nest securely, again they can travel from place to place, they have a kind of narrative that's

unwritten. Could be used by skateboarders in cities, could also be used by wheelchair users, and there are features of the design that are kind of muted but are present there. So I've put coping in, which is a kind of metal angle stock that a skateboarder would use to grind across using the friction of that metal. But I've also met the requirements for a single-step ramp that's a gray area in the ADA code, at least for US architectural wheelchair access codes. So in cities like Austin and New York in the US, these single-step entrances to small business are ubiquitous, they're everywhere, and they are grandfathered in to the standard architectural code because it's thought that it would be onerous for these small businesses to alter their entrances entirely, so they don't have to, in other words, take out that step. But it's a problem for access, and it's one single step, so a temporary ramp is called for. But what I find is that they're not much in use and the compliance around these small businesses tends to be complaint-driven by people who use wheelchairs. So what I wanted to do was to change the conversation entirely about a temporary ramp at a single-step entrance. What it would look like, could it become an architectural extension, could it be redesigned in a different kind of vernacular? And could a portable ramp be used at various kinds of sites? So if you look at the material design, you'll see that there are leveling feet so they can be raised up and down according to different kinds of idiosyncratic step heights, and again they can fold up and wheel away on casters, and then again could be used by another user, a skateboarder, and what I wanted to do was to mix these uses and playful kinds of connotations in a single object. As a kind of tactical measure to uncouple the kind of medicalization of wheelchair ramps that we've come to take for granted now. And to try to change the conversation around what a ramp has been in history, what a ramp can do, and who is seeking as I often like to say, who is seeking what kinds of elevations in cities. So sorry for that extended answer, but that's the kind of material design but it seemed to me that also it's a fact now that the digital space is the coextensive site of the public commons. It is as physical, as real to us as physical space, as material space. I think that it's a false divide to imagine that we live in real life and are material and that somehow the digital is a subspecies of that. The two are really truly intermixed now. So I wanted to make a kind of gonzo database of ramps in all kinds of conditions, that by their juxtaposition would similarly estrange a person from his or her received ideas about where a ramp is, and what a ramp does and who uses it, and again to kind of keep

this estranged curiosity and magic alive about the ramp everywhere. So now I find them and I collect them in all kinds of places.

AC: That's great. So of course that then leads to the next question, so the question was how can you imagine points of connection between the ramps and physical and virtual space, and you started to discuss that. If you could elaborate the questions after that would be (unintelligible) function the same or is it different, or what are the opportunities?

SH: For a ramp in digital space?

AC: Yes, the connections between the ramp in physical and virtual (unintelligible) and you sort of started alluding to that.

SH: Yeah. I mean one thing that I feel like is a really live question still in the project is what literally, what in digital vernacular terms would a ramp be? And a colleague of mine suggested some kind of gradient, some kind of similarly frictionless, gradual movement through space. How do you deform and alter the movement through which you click through digital space? It's not one that I feel like I've answered entirely. On my site, I direct you through the database by saying that you're mapping on the diagonal. And in some cases if you're clicking through the database, you don't go through in a logical manner; you'll click through and be in a different category, for instance, that again feels a little bit like more of an experience of estrangement and less of a logical menu and submenu way that you'd go through a typical website. I feel like again it's something that's emergent in the project.

AC: Okay, good. So what do you think are some of the outcomes of your online presence through Slope: Intercept for disability politics? In other words, what do you hope to achieve?

SH: I'm trying to join what's been called tactical urbanism, what's been called temporary insurgent architecture. In part by the materials that I chose, that is the wood, kind of industrial materials that I chose for those models. What I'm trying to do again there is to remove a kind of

medicalization around accessible architecture, and thereby its association with atypical bodies that tend to be medicalized and highly read in diagnostic ways and instead to think about the potential for such a thing as a ramp that's become invisible, and become medicalized, to become an agent of provocation. Both by play and by the kind of radical access that it provides to people whose bodies have been kept out of spaces. So in very material ways, I'm trying to do that. Online, I'm trying to insert the language of ramps into the kinds of languages about architecture and the imagery about architecture. Again, to mix it in places where it thus far hasn't really appeared. Because all politics can become echo chambers of the members who believe in their politics and that my interest in my work is always to find a voice for disability politics and disability advocacy and disability design outside of its ordinary channels, outside of audiences who already believe in the importance of those things. So I'm trying to engage architectural discourses, design discourses, and especially the kind of political activist sectors of those disciplines.

AC: Okay, great. So I'm wondering throughout your practices of working with Slope: Intercept and the motions of the ramp, how might your own personal ideas of access and mobility, how has it changed, if at all, and how has it evolved?

SH: I would pin this significantly recently with the creation of this sound file, which has been the specific document produced for *Crippling Cyberspace*, because in finding found sound and looking through at aural experiences of wheeled mobility such as skateboards, but also wheeled luggage and the kind of idiosyncratic small, wheeled gear that you see being pushed through space. And finally also instructional videos of people talking about the very particular ways that one moves the body on a skateboard, the way that one maneuvers a wheelchair with hands or without hands. That took me in a very particularly somatic direction by which I could also access this kind of phenomenology of the ramp, and indeed it invokes one of my architectural-historical sources. It's a utopian architectural practice in Paris, a partnership between Paul Virilio and Claude Parent which is called Architecture Principe. And they really believed that, and this is total irrespective in their minds of wheelchair use and there's no discourse about wheelchair use at all in their practice. But they really found that a body moving through the resistance of the

ramp going up and the acceleration of the ramp going down was a kind of radical phenomenological act that it was a kind of critique of the verticals and horizontals that dominate cities, as in steps. So once you start to dig into how you use a body through space, and resistance and acceleration, of course resistance is a weighted word in multiple senses, you start to kind of think about that, the rampedness, I have started to think about it in a more embodied way. Because I've been collecting images and relying heavily on sited access and text. But this was an invitation to look at some other very different bodied experience.

AC: Good, that's wonderful. Okay, so I wonder then, this question is more general, but I wonder if you could talk about it in the context of what you just said about the aural, but the question is what directions do you see the intersection of disability and cyberspace going in the future? I'm wondering if your Slope: Audio piece is something that you might view (unintelligible) working on, and then even more general if you think about intersections of disability and cyberspace and the potential of that.

SH: You know, I was really inspired and I know you were at this conference too, by Will Mayo and his new Spoken Layer, his app. And just his kind of claim to un-mute the Web, that alone, and I mean he's doing it absolutely as an entrepreneur, as someone who sees a kind of niche in the market that is to make much more – so I should just say that Spoken Layer is this kind of app that online magazines can use to have a kind of richly read aural experience of text that you would normally read – and he's posing that not just for non-sighted web users but for people who want to consume those as podcasts in their car. But in other words, that's what I mean about the Internet being so young, and if we look at the experiences of people with disabilities as alternate access points, and we look at that again in an aesthetic way, but also people who are interested in kind of market products can also lend innovation here, too. But if we look at the experience of disability as a kind of opening through which a lot of people will discover more kinds of access and will stop kind of shutting down our constrained experiences of what the Web should be, I think we'll all get a much richer sense of what, with ubiquitous computing, but also with our many bodies and the many ways that we consume information and interact, we'll get a

much richer and broader sense of things that we've not yet discovered. So yeah, it's an exciting time.

AC: Okay, so just another quick question, I was going to ask you to give me a little bit more background about Slope: Audio, you already talked a little bit about it, but I wonder how you came upon the idea and where you actually found all the little snippets, all the sound, help us to get a general sense of your perception of that work.

SH: So I started collecting a bunch of different kinds of possibilities and Freesound.org is this beautiful, enormous repository of all kinds of sounds, you know, everything you could possibly want, so I downloaded a bunch of those for free, and then I also used some Youtube videos that I checked out through the fair use policy for these purposes, that are instructional videos of various kinds. I also messed around with, I wrote a bunch of copy that would be me, describing the physical ramps that are included in the archive. And I tried out different voices even, for that description, some of it was historical and contextual, some of it was political, where that came to bear on those particular ramps, and then I tried out a voice that was much more conversational, like as though you had a companion with you and were saying, "Come with me to this site, and here's what it looks like materially, or here's how it's built, what are the materials that it's made from." But I found, and this is what's so interesting about the creative process, I found that it was much more compelling to keep it really narrowly focused on, again, this somatic experience of the ramp. Because when I heard skateboarders talking about the ramp, exactly how you do tricks on you skateboard, and there are hundreds of thousands of these, I mean skateboarding is a global phenomenon, it's so interesting how that experience feels disruptive and compelling in public space. And then there are fewer but some really interesting descriptions of people using their own wheelchairs and in their bodies, and you can hear their own breathing and their own effort through space, and I thought, it's actually, I should just abandon altogether, my own literal conception of what description is, and think about providing a kind of alternate experience entirely of the ramp. Of rampedness, and acceleration and resistance, again. So focus on cutting out those other possibilities that I'd played around with ended up yielding a really layered audio set of tracks, right, with a bunch of different wheels stacked on one another. And then one other

really interested addition there was this physics professor. In one of these very straight-ahead, scientific videos, talking about what is the action of force across a surface, how do we describe it. And what I found listening to his long lecture, but what I found in selecting snippets here and there was again, talking about the use of force and about resistance, has a very interesting political overtone, and poetic overtone, if you listen to it in the right way. So I tried to select tracks in there that I felt were evocative beyond just their physics, just their mechanics, but where's there's an interesting "gee whiz" action of gravity description as well. So I wanted to again have that motion be really foregrounded.

AC: (unintelligible)

SH: I'm sorry, can you repeat it, you were in and out there.

AC: Yeah. (unintelligible) compile those clips (unintelligible)

SH: Oh yeah, that was an Avid video-editing software. Only because I have it ready-at-hand to use, you wouldn't need that, you could use GarageBand probably.

AC: Okay, so we're just about to finish up, so the last question is, I think you've almost answered this too, but how has this (unintelligible) challenged you, being involved with Crippling Cyberspace. Have you (unintelligible) being part of (unintelligible)?

SH: I have much enjoyed it, and as I mentioned yeah, this feels very much like the live next set of questions for my work, because it's one thing to have a digital archive that is growing and emergent and is the corollary of a material design, but it's another to think really conceptually about a ramped space online, but more than that about access in its broadest forms, and who benefits from it, who gets an alternate experience, and whose experience is heightened one way or the other. This to me seems to be the very interesting and open question, and if we bring our best practices to bear, we really can make sort of critical access tools that become better

experiences for many different kinds of users. And that challenge was really fun and provocative for me.

AC: I wonder how you feel now about these next steps that I've asked you to be involved in. And the other artists are going to be doing audio descriptions of their visual work, I've asked you to do a written transcript now, a textual layer of your sound work. So how do you feel about being pushed in that direction.

SH: Yeah, well that'll be interesting. I mean I think again, all constraints are generative constraints, so I think this'll be – I mean that now I guess I will go back to some reliance on description, but to invoke those layers I might break with prose sentences and try to make them a laundry list, or use capital letters to emphasize when sounds are fading in and fading out. I think that some poetic license there too – not just for kicks – may be more evocative of that experience. So I hope that'll be faithful and generative and not just an exercise.

AC: Okay, I'm sure it'll be great. I think we're going to close. Thanks again.