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Conversation Between Cassandra Hartblay and Amanda Cachia

Amanda Cachia: Okay. Hi Cassandra. Thank you for being with me today for our Skype interview for Cripping Cyberspace. I'm going to start with the list of questions here. So, the first is what do you think are the alternative constraints or possibilities for disabled people in cyberspace?

Cassandra Hartblay: I think this is a really important question. I think the first and kind of the most important thing to consider when you talk about cyberspace and disability is just the very barren kind of ugly fact that so many people with disabilities live in poverty, and that affects basic access to cyberspace in terms of hardware and technology. So I just want to be cognizant of that, and even ability that people have to get online. But in terms of the sort of theoretical question about how cyberspace can be enabling in new ways, I think that we all have become aware of the really exciting networking capacities of cyberspace in terms of, we've all been introduced to someone we "have to know" by a friend who knows a friend of a friend on Facebook or LinkedIn or Twitter. And so it becomes a process of both connecting with people that it becomes beneficial to know, and also a process of self-recognition by which all of our senses of selves are sort of consolidated and reflected through our online networks. And we kind of form our own critical awareness by noticing what we have in common with people who we have these online relationships with that we might not get to be in touch with on such a frequent basis in our physical lives. And then also I think, especially doing research in Russia, in a part of the world where a lot of people with disabilities are extremely isolated from one another and segregated from mainstream society, online life can really offer an outlet from a sense of isolation. So that you can participate in a social life without ever leaving your apartment. And then also, I was reading through these questions earlier and I was really thinking about how for disability theory, there's something really nice about the digital age in that it kind of brings into being a ubiquity of prosthesis. So you know, Donna Haraway predicted that we would all become cyborgs and I think in a way that's really happened in the sense that our online selves become a part of our physical selves and our physical lives reach into online worlds in order to be whole, and one isn't greater than the other, or vice versa, and both are not equal to the sum of the parts. So I had the experience of using this idea of prosthesis to explicate how prosthetics

might be stigmatized or not with a group of undergraduate students in a workshop. You know, when you say, "Imagine if someone took away your iPhone or your iPhone broke," there's this sudden and totally new recognition of what it means if someone's glasses break, or someone's prosthetic limb breaks, or if someone's wheelchair fails to function, and so I think there's a really nice development there of the normalization of prosthetic technology that hasn't been stigmatized, or hasn't ever existed in the medicalized gaze. So I think that that's a really promising thing that might develop.

AC: Okay. And so the next question leads off the first, so how are barriers and possibilities in physical space then different or even the same to that of cyberspace for disabled people?

CH: I've been thinking about this a lot through the process of working on this artwork for this project, and I think first of all the sort of obvious thing to say is that the insights from universal design in the physical world still hold true in the virtual world, which is that there is no utopia. And something that might be enabling for one user can be totally disabling for someone else. So just the way the chirping sidewalk crossing might be really enabling for someone with low vision, it can be totally distracting for someone with autism, and then a similar thing can happen online where technological interfaces might be fantastic for someone and totally exclude other people. So that's one thing. Another thing is that especially, I've really been running into this, I've been thinking of through this project, is this question of how the environment is built and social geography and universal design, we talk a lot about the built environment, and I think kind of take for granted that when we say "the built environment" we mean the physical environment. But we then use the word to build when we say to build a website, and in some ways that's a metaphorical linguistic construction, but in other ways it's completely not. It's a very literal construction, not meaning to make a pun there, but I think when we are constructing a website, we're thinking very carefully about how pieces fit together, and how design and elements might result in certain outcomes for users. And then you also have to – resulting question of how easy is it for users to rebuild or change or manipulate a given environment. And in some cases, it's easier to manipulate an online environment, and in some cases it's easier to manipulate a physical environment. But that also depends on who you are and what your embodiment is like.

AC: Okay. So tell me about, "Do you like this installation?" and how the project is linked to a Crip intervention in cyberspace.

CH: "Do you like this installation?" is an iteration, it's a part of my larger dissertation research project, which is an ethnography of disability and inclusion in contemporary Russia. I have done over a year of fieldwork in Russia specifically on this question, and spent a lot of time living in communities, and spending most of my time with people with disabilities, both participating in their daily lives and collecting interviews. So, one of the things that came out of my drive to want to have a very participatory research project was something that the community was really interested in, was the question of access to physical space, because there are so many barriers. And in the fall of 2012, there was this Internet meme that started to circulate internationally actually, that was a series of photos of completely inaccessible ramps in Russia. And you know, everybody I knew sent me this link, and at the same time, the community was saying, "We just wish people realized how inaccessible our environment is." So we made a community blog or a photo archive of places that are accessible and inaccessible in the city, and that was I guess phase one of the public face of this project, and then when I returned to the US, I was really struggling to think through how I was going to deal with the question of online lives and embodied lives. Because I just really hadn't anticipated, in talking about disability and inclusion, the extent to which I would have to talk about the Internet. I knew that I was going to be talking about the politics of space and public space in Russia versus in the US, and the built environment in Russia versus the US, but I didn't know that so much of my interaction with the people that I was doing fieldwork with would be online, and I didn't know that so much of their daily lives would center around online interactions. So I had been thinking about this physical installation for a while in some form. I wanted to do something with voting in the sense of moving through space in order to cast a vote. And then when I started to think through what it would mean to cast a vote physically versus in cyberspace I thought that there was something really interesting there that could help me formulate a theoretical understanding of what I was experiencing in terms of this sort of divide or – I don't even know what to call it still – this strange interaction between online accessibility and physical accessibility. So I guess I was thinking through all of this, and this paradigm of ethnographic installation, which is something that I've been working on as a way to take ethnographic observations from fieldwork and rework them or access them or build them

anew in the form of contemporary art through a sort of very simplified, very clean interface in the idiom of contemporary art. So I think of this in the tradition of performance ethnography following Dwight Conquergood and other ethnographers. But I also think it's really important to disability studies in that as an ethnographer whose goal is to recenter the stories of people with disabilities, I think it's really important to put research outcomes in places and in voices or idioms or representations that aren't only textual articles designed for scholarly audiences. So this is an attempt also at a public anthropology that lets laypeople and research participants interact in the process of knowledge creation in a much more explicit way than just being interviewed.

AC: Okay, so what is the relationship then between – you've already talked a little bit about this, but if you could elaborate, so the relationship between the physical and virtual platforms of "Do you like this installation?" Does it look and function the same, or is it different, and how do you actually – how are you trying to connect these two spaces?

CH: Right. So I think the kind of core of this is I wanted to lay bare how design can preclude or produce certain outcomes by intentionally or unintentionally allowing access. So the design of the installation in the physical space is such that a participant enters the space and finds that they're prompted with a question like, "Here is your ballot. Do you like this installation? Vote Yes or No by placing your ballot in the appropriate box." And there is a ballot box labeled Yes and one labeled No, but for people with normative embodiments, the Yes box is easily reachable but the No box is out of reach. So I guess what I am aiming for there is right away for the able-bodied or non-disabled audience member participant to feel the sense of frustration that a lot of my research participants feel when they encounter a ramp that doesn't work, or a set of steps that is impossible, or a counter that's too high. So then the kind of trope to that, or I guess escape hatch from that is that there's also a website and even standing in the physical installation if you have a handheld cellphone that's Internet-enabled, you can go to the website and you can vote Yes or No freely from the website. So I guess I'm just playing with the way that the design of the online interface might be more enabling for some people in the sense that they're easily able to vote Yes or No as many times as they like there, whereas in the physical space they have to physically reconfigure the space in some way in order to reach the No box if they want to vote

No. So I guess again that kind of comes back to the question of whether it's easier to redesign physical space or cyberspace and for who, and how does access to technology change that? And I think there's sort of an ongoing battle in the world right now, even on a geopolitical level aside from the very personal, nitty-gritty level for who gets to control how cyberspace is designed, and who gets to control how physical space is designed. So I think about Edward Snowden, and I think is this an argument, is this a conflict that's really in a lot of ways about who controls pixels and how the flow of information gets designed.

AC: I just wanted to ask then, just some extra questions here. So how then were you going to track your observations of how people are interacting with these spaces?

CH: I guess the third component of the project in addition to the online and physical interfaces is the data collection process, which is both a tongue-in-cheek gesture to me as an ethnographer, you know I'm standing there with my clipboard in the corner, scribbling notes and then regurgitating this information in the form of charts. But I actually think that there will be something really fascinating that comes out of this process. I'm tracking online interface in terms of Google Analytics, who comes to the website and who visits the voting page, where they're from in the world, and what time they visited the website. Then initially the voting interface tracks who votes Yes and who votes No, at what time of day did they vote Yes and at what time of day did they vote No. I'm kind of fascinated by that, just what does the raw production of information if I graph these things and it's all sort of preconfigured to turn this information into graphic knowledge. What does that tell us about whether or not people like this installation and whether or not people are voting and why. And then also in the physical space, naturally, there's sort of a more analog consideration of voting, which is I think count the ballots daily at a certain time of day, during the course of the physical installation. And then there's also the possibility for online viewers to watch what's unfolding in the physical installation through a streaming video, so that again kind of complicates who has access to what and who's being surveilled by whom and who has awareness.

AC: So, what are some of the outcomes do you think? I mean it's still early days, but what do you think will be some of the outcomes of "Do you like this installation?" for disability politics? So, what are you trying to achieve or what do you hope to achieve?

CH: I guess I see the outcomes in two veins. One is as an activist project and in a sense I am thinking about artists who are using viral digital interfaces to spread ideas. I think Sara Hendren's Accessible Icon project did that really well, and also Sophia Wallace has a literacy project that's moving around the Internet right now that I think is a fantastic example that she explicitly says, "This is meant to go viral." Which I love as a statement from an artist, because what art isn't meant to go viral? And I think in a way the kind of meta question of this installation, "Do you like this installation?" is sort of mocking that impetus that Andy Warhol you know, we all want to be famous, and I think I don't want to be famous, I just want this to go viral because I think that access is important and it's kind of a confounding circle where you think through this ego versus the political outcome of the project. But then also I think that in terms of outcomes, I talked a little bit already about how I see the idea of ethnographic installation as being part of opening a dialogue as a researcher with both the people that I conduct research with and then also the broader public. And Jill Magid is an artist whose work I think does something that's really inspired me, which is that she really clearly posits the process itself as the form. And I think that ethnographers also do that in that all the mistakes that we make and all the strange and unexpected happenings then become part of the data, and part of the thing itself. So I guess basically, this research or this art project is also part of my research methodology, which is part of the process of knowledge creation.

AC: Okay, so how might your own personal ideas of access and ability evolve through your "Do you like this installation?" project? Has it already changed, what directions might it take?

CH: So it's kind of funny because even outside of the disability studies vein of my work, the word access has a certain currency in anthropological fieldwork, because we're always talking about gaining access in the field by building rapport with the people we're intending to "study", which I say in scare quotes. In the digital age, I think that the question of access has really changed because I think there are probably ethnographers who are studying people who don't

even know they're being studied because they're just in a digital chat room. I've seen several ethnographic projects that are literally working with chatroom comments. Or Internet forum projects. And so the field – what we call the field as ethnographers – has really changed in the digital age, and for me that's especially true in the sense that the people that I interact with as part of my research, even when I'm physically in a different space that I'm still interacting with them through Facebook or Skype or the Russian version of Facebook. And so that's been really interesting and even with, especially considering disability, there are certain people who participated in this project for whom digital interaction is a much more fluid and preferred form of interaction. I have someone who is part of this project who has very slow speech and slow motor coordination, and so when we do face-to-face interviews, it actually requires a really different kind of interaction for me as an ethnographer because I have to literally suspend my normative conception of time in order to listen coldly. But this is someone who totally understands that and spends most of his day online, so often after we have a face-to-face interaction, I'll get home and he's already sent me six online messages saying, "Oh, what I meant to say about this, here let me copy and paste something that I wrote before, so that you can see what I was talking about." Here's another conversation. The copy and paste function really changes his ability to quickly reproduce ideas. And then the digital pixels as representation of ideas travel through space and communicate, quote-unquote, faster than spoken words do. So that's really interesting way that that's happened. Sorry, I'm talking about my research, I don't really know, instead of the project.

AC: That's fine. If we could just move on to the next question. I had to move away from the screen temporarily, but just keep talking as it's recording. But the question is the final one, so what directions do you see the intersection of disability and cyberspace going in the future? And then, I'm just curious to know how you found it engaging in this project of the Cripping Cyberspace, you know the virtual exhibition process, and if it's been challenging et cetera. So it's a two-pronged question.

CH: I think that in terms of disability in cyberspace, new technological advances have always been creating new kinds of disability or changing what we deem as disabling or not disabling. I think of my vision and whether or not I would be perceived as having a disability based on my

own vision in a different time and place, and because I have a non-stigmatized corrective lens now, it's not considered to be a disability. And so we're constantly changing these human machine or human prosthetic interactions. And I've heard a lot from laypeople who hear about my research, "Well, isn't the amount of people with disabilities increasing because we have better medical technologies so people with severe disabilities are living longer?" And what I kind of say to that is that what we define as disabling and what we define as a normative or corrective prosthetic is also always changing. So the question of whether there are more people with disabilities now or in the past has less to do with the medical technology and what it can do and more to do with how we perceive it. And then in terms of participating in this project, it's been a really fantastic kind of push for me to move my ideas ahead kind of on a faster timeline than I had been anticipating. And I think the biggest insight so far is that it's really difficult to intentionally design inaccessibility. With the physical installation, I just wasn't expecting how much work it would be to logistically create a physical interface of inaccessibility, which is strange. And I'm really looking forward to seeing the whole project all together, because I haven't seen the other artworks yet.

AC: Okay, good. And what about the push that I've given you to do the audio transcription. I know you haven't probably started engaging with it yet, but just any general thoughts around that?

CH: I'm sorry, could you say that one more time?

AC: Oh. How I've requested everybody to engage in an audio transcription process? And even though you haven't started it yet, I'm just wondering if you have any general thoughts around that.

CH: Yeah. I saw your email about that today, and I was thinking about it, and I was thinking first of all it's a big job. That's the first thought, right. And I guess I was sort of thinking that what's kind of interesting about this project is that given that there's no utopian design because design is always kind of a process of trying something and trying something else, the question isn't really about how we do it the first time, sort of much as how we are able to constantly reconfigure to

make things work. And so I think that that sort of is the new perspective on accessibility that I'm coming to by thinking that through in terms of a flexibility to difference. And also the learning process that results from translating something into a new form in order to make it accessible for another audience or a particular audience.

AC: Yes, exactly. Okay, is there anything else you wanted to add before we end the interview?

CH: No. I want to interview you now!

AC: Okay. Well, maybe next time! I thought that was quite good, but thank you so much for being part of this project.