CANADIAN JOURNAL OF
Disability Studies
Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association · Association Canadienne des Études sur l'Incapacité

Canadian Journal of Disability Studies

Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association
Association Canadienne des Études sur l'Incapacité

Hosted by The University of Waterloo

www.cjds.uwaterloo.ca

cjdseditor@uwaterloo.ca

Conversation Between the m.i.a. Collective and Amanda Cachia

Amanda Cachia: Hi everybody. Thanks for joining me today for our interview. So I'm going to read out the list of questions. The first is what do you think are the alternative constraints or possibilities for disabled people in cyberspace? Actually, it would be good also if you could just each introduce yourselves.

MIA Collective: Hi, I'm Arseli Dokumaci; I'm a researcher at the Mobile Media Lab.

I'm Laurence Parent; I'm a PhD student, and my research (*unintelligible*).

And I'm Kim Sawchuk, and I'm a professor in the Department of Communications Studies, and the codirector of the Mobile Media Lab, and we're all members of the MIA Collective.

AC: Great, okay. So can we talk about question number one?

KS: Sure. Arseli, did you want to start?

AD: Will you read out the question first, or should we just answer it?

AC: Just answer it. I just read it out, so you can just answer.

AD: We were just talking about between the experience of the cyberspace is generally calling for the question of what actually we mean by disability, which categories of impairment are we talking about, since disability is not this kind of big, overarching category that we can give generic answers about, and more like it calls into question is it a sensory impairment, what kind of sensory impairment, visual, hearing impaired, or are we talking about a physical impairment. So it kind of calls into question what actually we mean about the nature of disability and how it connects to cyberspace. I don't know if you have anything to add to that?

KS: No, but I think it's for us an important question that we think about maybe not as just a uniform category or disabled people as one type of person but as, it comprises many different types of people as well as different types of disability. Laurence, did you have anything you wanted to add?

LP: That's good.

KS: So, when thinking then about the question the alternative constraints or possibilities for disabled people in cyberspace, this present work is about the question to a large extent about visible and invisible disabilities connected to physical impairments, not so much cognitive impairments. So in that sense, there's ways that cyberspace allows for forms of virtual movement beyond what the borders are sometimes of the physical world, and makes possible access to certain forms of information, culture or knowledge that may be difficult to access if physical movement is difficult.

AC: Great. Okay, should I go on to the next question?

MIA: Sure.

AC: Are you ready for the next question? Yup? Okay, so the second question is how are barriers or possibilities in physical space then different to that of cyberspace for disabled people in your opinions.

LP: I would say that physical space and cyberspace do not share the same history. So, for example, here in Montreal, we have a long history of oppression and exclusion in the physical space, which has a great influence on disabled people; it's really life experiences. So we think that cyberspace has a whole different history and is not intertwined with physical space, but I would say that the biggest difference between both, right now with the people we are working with, are really related to their experience and aware of where (*unintelligible*) is coming from. So I would say that in general, maybe people like the hope of changing things and just by

regroupings. Whereas when we (*unintelligible*) in arts, people maybe have more faith in it to create new possibilities.

KS: Arseli, do you want to add to that?

AD: Okay. I was just thinking about what kind of, although it's also important to think about the (*unintelligible*) between cyberspace and the actual physical space, as we were saying before, we just started our conversation. Maybe one thing in relation to our work, especially (*unintelligible*) piece could be to think about how cyberspace can capture the many, minute details in everyday life, and that actually do not (*unintelligible*) as you are caught in the (*unintelligible*) of action that you don't pay attention to little details, but in recorded media and using digital media, you can just pinpoint the details that disabled people have to deal with on a day-to-day basis. And they have to manage their everyday lives according to that response in the architectural (*unintelligible*) and in the crippling landscape like how all the roads can be cluttered and the kind of effect it has the wheelchair user, and then how you have to wait for the bus for long hours and what kind of networks you are entangled into, like the bus network, other infrastructures, things that normally you would never question in everyday life. That you can bring these details, one after the other, in the medium of cyberspace (*unintelligible*), I think.

KS: So again, I think we talked about cyberspace, we think about it as well, not just as a kind of room but it's a kind of assemblage of devices, an assemblage of people, it's an assemblage of know-how and practices, and it's different kinds of media and media formats. And so our question is how can we use all of those different elements to be able to help people notice things that they take for granted, but that act as access and barriers to the full participation of disabled people in culture, in civic life, in politics, in education, you name it, because it's so strongly embedded in the built world that we live in that we don't even notice, and so for us it's this question of how can cyberspace be used as itself a kind of vehicle as opposed to make people notice, and for us I think to document and to ourselves pay attention to those things.

AC: So tell me more now about your new work, so the virtual poster series, and how this project for you is linked to a crip intervention in cyberspace.

KS: Laurence, do you want to start?

LP: Not necessarily.

KS: Let's think. Well, maybe you want to talk a little bit about the idea of crip intervention. 'Cause I think that's closely related to your piece on "Cripping the Landscape".

Laurence: I think it's really to change the way we see disability in general, like how mainstream discourse would say their actions or their abilities are limited. So the idea of cripping is to disable the system, is to show that the system is disabled, and it is to take action to make it not work anymore. Because it seems to be working, but in fact we want to show that it's not working.

KS: I think the work that Laurence is doing is twisting the idea in a sense of what is it that's disabled. It's not the individual; it's the way that the system is constructed. And I guess crip theory is related in ways to queer theory and other forms of theoretical intervention that use hyperbole and irony and other visual-rhetorical means to basically point out this kind of problem and injustice that's not just rooted in the bodies of individuals, but really, especially in the work that Laurence did, is rooted in the landscape.

LP: I think that the way we do it, we gave people a sensory experience of the world but we acknowledged that people had different (*unintelligible*) and experiences. In the mainstream disability rights discourse, this question of, "What are differences?" is just erased most of the time, and I think we think it's problematic.

KS: Yes we do.

AD: I mean, one thing to add to that, the very good point that bodies are really different, and you have to appreciate the difference of them rather than just take it for granted that it's one universal body (*unintelligible*) discourse, but in cyberspace, what might allow us and other artists and practitioners to do is to put layers on the work that might help connect different kinds of (*unintelligible*) with disabilities, like putting audio captions on a film, it should already be on all other kinds of media that aren't accessible for the people within audio descriptions and making other kinds of disabilities have conversations with each other, like the fact that putting layers to different kinds of body experiences is a good possibility in cyberspace.

KS: I also want to add to the way that crip intervention is done using the technology and again I want to go back to Laurence's piece, the "Cripping the Landscape", because the wheelchair and the Hero-cam become not just accessories, they become integral to the work, so she's not holding it on, she's manipulating her chair, but she's the one who's made the decision where it goes from. So there's also the camera, it 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, and possibility of movement within specific kinds of conditions. So I think there's a crip intervention as well of the appropriation of the technologies, where the wheelchair perspective in this case is in some ways almost foregrounded, putting the viewer in a different point-of-view or perspective. So the virtual poster series is partially about capturing that, but also thinking about what is a poster in this realm of the digital and in the realm of cyberspace. Like, where's the wall? There isn't a wall; you distribute it differently. And so we were also thinking about how to in some ways manipulate, maybe not crip, but intervene in the way we think the relationship between 2D and 3D image, about the way the 2D image is also something that has the ability because the possibility of .gifs but also because of the ability of a poster to circulate differently in cyberspace. So it's that kind of mutable function. So again, this work comes out of an assemblage of old work, but then because of you, we created new work, and because of the challenge you posed to us. So it's also in some ways cyberspace is a place where the digital allows for a kind of parsing of pieces and components and their reassemblage by us together, separately, apart, in combination, in collaboration with each other, in collaboration with assocations like REPTIC, we're working on disability rights in Quebec. We

have artists like Antonio Badd (sp?), who's working in Barcelona with different communities, and individual makers like Laurence or Arseli (sp?).

AC: That's great. Could you talk a little bit about, I didn't even put this on this question list, but it should say the interface that people will come, when they first come to the website, they'll have this concept of the traffic lights, so the red, yellow, green, so could you talk a little bit about what that is and how you want people to navigate through that space?

LP: (*unintelligible*) well I think it's all about movement. And it took us a long time to decide which project should be in which colour, but (*unintelligible*).

KS: I think we decided that you know yellow was already working with megaphone, that red, because we had used the text off ableism that red seemed appropriate for that, and then green, because that was a good colour for what you were doing. And it was left. And it was also about go. So the traffic lights are also about a device that's another technology that controls the movement and flow of people, cars, machines, bicycles. All kinds of people interact in a space. So we were thinking about, well who stops, who starts, who yields. And in some ways, Arseli was away at this point and Laurence and I were together at a conference, and spent a lot of time thinking visually about how we could include projects we felt were related, but find a way to combine them in a way that had a separate and integrated meaning. And again, the square became important to us because of, well, the square in the grid, but also the square in the (*unintelligible*) movement, the way it's been appropriated by different protest movements here was important to us, and yeah.

AC: I think it's really successful; I really like it a lot.

KS: Thank you. We're really pleased with it because it felt like we were trying to come up with something quite quickly. We did respect the challenge you posed to us about making something new and different, but we weren't sure how we were going to do it or what it was going to be,

but again, we kind of worked with I think sometimes that three heads are better than one since we don't know what's going to get made when we sit down and chat with each other.

AC: Yeah, I think it's really successful, so you've done really well; I'm really happy with the outcome. Okay, so let's move on to the fourth question. So, what is the relationship between, for you guys, what do you think is the relationship between the physical and virtual platforms in your work? Is it the same, does it function the same, or is it different, and how do you connect the physical and the virtual space in the work?

AD: (*unintelligible*) as we're thinking that the experience that it could be kind of a repetition of what I said before about the multi-sensorial experience in life that can be worked on in detail in the virtual space. Like when the Hero-cam is put on a wheelchair, and it can see the point-of-view of the wheelchair user, and how it feels actually to move in a wheelchair throughout the day. You can constantly hear in the background the sound that the wheels make onto the pavement, and actually Laurence lives with that every day. I mean, whenever she goes out and going all around the space, and the vibration of the stones and the pavement, this sensory experience is very kind of aesthetic experience that is not necessarily registered in the physical space, can be brought up in the light in the virtual space, so this kind of information (*unintelligible*). Also, in the architecture lab, in (*unintelligible*) I think one important thing to say could be (*unintelligible*) to question the everyday, question the structure, and bring a change, some new qualities, some new kind of architectural design would be made so, not to do something just to question the structure of the architecture, but also to make a change in the architecture. To bring the experience of the disabled person in the light, so that that can be taken into account later for other people who are responsible for taking care of these spaces.
LP: But I think it's also changing people's own experiences, like for example, in my view (*unintelligible*) I was there, but when I did it, it changed the way I think, how – my point-of-view from my own was not the same as the one of the Hero-cam. And prosthetically pushed to think in a more mainstream way, that you come to forget your own experiences in some ways; I don't know if it's true. I think, so when you take the time to sit down and work on those things, I think it will change the way you experience those things and you decide to, yeah,just all the people

that are involved in the project, it's just that we decide to use, to tell stories that we maybe were not able to tell before. But maybe (*unintelligible*) question.
KS: Yeah. I also want to say that because Laurence is also president of our (*unintelligible*), I think as well that a lot of the video material can act as supplement for making the point to people who are in a lot of ableist denial, I think, about the density of the problem, which I think the "Megaphone Map" shows is the prevalence of what we just don't know is as Laurence would say, "the hegemony of stairs," and then in the "Architectural Ableism" video, those were decisions made by the participants instead. You know, we don't want to just map locations; we want to tell stories about what it means to move through that physical environment. And so again, digital tools for both recording, capturing, editing and distributing then become ways of creating a record of that, in the spaces that were chosen and scripted by the participants themselves. So it becomes a communal form of knowledge-sharing, but then you appreciate venues where they can also be shown either as a single video or all together as a group, or in different ways, and connect to whatever issues need to be connected. And then, I think we've sort of answered everything here. But those things are connected and it's the same way that organizations like REPTIC are really successfully using the media and mainstream media in some cases to try and cover events. You know, cyberspace also means as activist organizations, they can put up the links and the posts to news coverage they have, so again cyberspace is this kind of tentacle of possibilities that they're virtual, but it's up to us to figure out creative ways that bring people together to actualize what their potential is.

AC: That's great. Question number five, I feel like you may have already answered that, but I'll ask it anyway and then see if there's anything you want to add to it, you can. So five is, what are some of the outcomes of your online presence through the virtual poster series. So what do you hope to achieve in terms of disability politics through this work?

LP: Well, (*unintelligible*) I think that one of the things, the challenges we have is that Montreal is just, there's just such a level of ableism, which is very central to our collective. It's like the concept that it's not really part of the discourse, well it's not part of mainstream (*unintelligible*), and even the community, it's not a term that people would use. So it's been a challenge for us to

bring that question into our work, but in some ways it's also easy to – well, people know that we experience discrimination, but to talk about it and to have the support of people who are interested in what we are going through is changing everything. So our goal is to create a space for people to come together, to challenge all the oppression that people experience.

KS: Yeah. But as to why it doesn't get noticed or talked about, so I think that what we'd like to achieve is that we'd really, really like for the provincial and federal government, the municipal government to actually respect the Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedoms just from the beginning, which is supposed to guarantee equal access to people in terms of public space. And this goes to everything; REPTIC's most recent intervention was about polling stations that are not accessible. And so how can you participate as a citizen in democracy at this more formal level when you create stations that are located in buildings that have twenty or ten or five steps. So again I think that we're in for a long battle, I think all of us, and I think we would like very much for – we don't think that law can take care of everything, but it would be really great if there was a consciousness at least in Montreal and in Quebec that there's a serious issue here. And transportation has to change, access to buildings has to change. And actually there's a law on the book, but you know, what governments choose to enforce and what they choose to ignore is really interesting and really telling, and really is all about the ableism that's totally and thoroughly inscribed in our culture, that people like myself are participants in, and have been, without even knowing.

AD: Also in the special context of Quebec, I think it's really important that this is the place where there are lots of immigrants and migration. There is an issue, you know, with disability and gender, and in Montreal there's a big gay community. So it's like disability in this specific case is also pressing between the identities here, and it's a very rich subject to work on. And unfortunately, there is not a very strong critical disability studies institution in the province of Quebec. It's very (*unintelligible*), and also the value of this work would be to establish a disciplinary discourse as well, a critical disability studies. And also the work and the MIA collective have a kind of archival and documentary value. So for future research, people can refer to the pieces, especially "Megaphone," and pictures and photos, because there's a large

database of the architecture of Montreal in (*unintelligible*) changing for us. That's kind of the documentary value of the work.

LP: Yeah, it's really about creating knowledge.

KS: And creating knowledge that then circulates, which is why the cyberspace element is, I think, crucial. Because we don't know where it will go, and who will look at it, and what they'll (*unintelligible*) to, and that's kind of the beauty of it.

AC: Alright, so, and if we could try to wrap up the interview in the next five minutes that would be really good. So I was just wondering how each of you might feel that your own ideas of access and mobility have evolved, or have changed through your work with the virtual poster series, and then "Cripping the Landscape" and "Megaphone" and all the various projects that you've been working on. If you could each talk briefly about that, or maybe it hasn't really changed, or what have been the effects of the process?

LP: Well, for sure there's access, we have some way to go. At least we know what are the challenges, and for example, the piece that I've done I'm sort of conscious that it's not totally accessible. Well for me access is a very personal thing, I guess. But when I meet new people, it's always evolving, changing at the same time, and then mobility, it's much broader than in my everyday life I thought it was. And it's just opening new opportunities to think about it another way. I think it's more (*unintelligible*).

KS: I think having to do this and work with your deadline forced us into realizing that we were a collective, and that we'd been struggling with making a presence for ourselves, even though we've been working together for quite a while now. And so I think that having the exhibition and participating and once we started talking about this idea, I think we had about twenty around the table at a certain point. And that became, "Well, what can we actually realize within the timeline?" So I think what it's done is it's helped us to understand the intervention that we want to make, but also how to connect it to other art movements, other community art movements,

other political art movements, and just keep doing the research within all these different realms so that our ongoing identity and collaborations can keep evolving in ways that we don't know where it's going to take us. But we're kind of happy with being forced into thinking about, well, what does it mean to have this very ambitious, political project that uses the power of creativity and storytelling and visual to make what we see as really vital, important points about issues of access and mobility, for a large number of people, who, even if they're not now suffering from an impairment or are not disabled, they're in relationship to that environment, they're in relationship to others, and they're part of a social network and whole that I think we all have to take accountability for and be responsible for. Your turn.

AD: I don't have an answer; I'm all fine.

AC: Last question then. So, what do you predict are the future directions for this intersection of disability and the virtual. Like, what do you think are the exciting possibilities or the challenges? Especially as it applies to your own work as a collective.

LP: I just see many opportunities; I guess (*unintelligible*). Because it's so new but so rich at the same time, and it's hard to answer that question.

KS: I think what's interesting about it is the work has brought us into contact with others like we went to London recently; Laurence set up some meetings with other disability activists and then we learned about other projects that had been done. We learned about the use of social media by groups who were doing very performative, direct actions to counter cuts that are happening in Britain and new administrative regimes being put in place to cut off people's benefits, so I think you're going to see the intersection between disability rights groups using performative and artistic ways to get their messages across because they're unhappy with mainstream media. So I think you're going to see more of that online; I think we talked to people who were talking about the use of Twitter to let people know if there were demonstrations and social media. I know that there's research and work going on around places like Second Life, where people get together to discuss protests. So these are all ways that I think the position of cyberspace as being

appropriated by people for whatever purpose, at whatever moment they need it to be, to do. So I see it as being, not just an intersection, but I think disability issues can actually change the nature of what cyberspace is, and what it includes.

AD: In that respect, it's like as Kim and Laurence have been saying, that people really create their new accordances almost, in cyberspace. Like, disabled people in everyday life always have to deal with things that are barriers, obstacles, but in cyberspace, by networking with other people, activists, and using things like Twitter, all kinds of opportunities and prosthetic tools that cyberspace gives, they kind of create accordances of dealing with obstacles and sometimes even what effect they have on the actual space, we don't know, or maybe that's something for another question. But it's one of the good opportunities in the future, I guess.

KS: One other thing that I'd say because of what Laurence and Arseli had mentioned, intersectionality is that what that accordance also implies is people having the economic means to afford having access to the networks and the tools and the technologies. So, I again we can't talk about this without thinking about the relationship between personal economies and lives and that whole political economy, and the more that, for example, people are forced to assume really unjust policies around healthcare or housing, the irony might be that the access that they need to the tools for the means of communication and to networks might be harder to get because of sheer economics.

LP: So that's actually an issue that we have right now. It's not, for example when we get our project, it's not that easy to refuse participants, because not a lot of disabled people can afford to have a smartphone.

KS: And we have trouble getting money for projects, to pay for technologies and network services, and they're really incredibly expensive, so that if you're putting a project together like that, you have to fundraise to ensure that you can subsidize participants, and so it's a challenge.

AC: Okay, great. I also now just wanted to throw in quickly, it seems to me that I have posed a challenge to you, in terms of deadline and asking you to think more about the perceptual apparatus of the project, so I was wondering how that process had been for you, and if you've enjoyed the various challenges that I've posed to you, including the new audio description element that is a new project that I've added in for everybody, to think more about access and how your work is going to be accessible in various ways. I think that Arseli was talking about that earlier, so I do want to know how that process has been for you.

LP: Well, we are working on it.

AD: Yeah, we're working on it. We will get it ready by the deadline.

AC: Yeah. But everything also, like the rest of the process, like the entire thesis of the exhibition.

LP: Well, it has been (*unintelligible*) thinking, and – but it has been really fun, too.

KS: Fun and stressful. But we thank you. I mean, again, it's like – I think we all are always working to deadline, so I think the exhibition's important and I think once it's over we'll maybe have more feedback. I think for the moment, though, it's really great trying to add these other dimensions and layers to it, have something that's in a gallery space and online, working with the journal, working in this very kind of fluid, very multi-dimensional way. I think it's a good curatorial project.

AC: And you had (unintelligible) with the other artists in the project, too?

AD: I couldn't get it.

KS: Have we spoken to the other artists?

LP: Well, we looked for them on Youtube, I forgot the name of the woman – she's in the UK, I think, we watched her movies.

KS: Watched a lot of them together. And that was great, so we really enjoyed that. And we also – I didn't know Sara's work, so then, again, the amazing thing about cyberspace is you give us one person in a link and suddenly we're following hundreds of links, and finding other people, and getting other ideas, and so I think it can all be – all that kind of surfing from your computer screen or cellphone can be both, sometimes you think, "I'm just wasting time here, surfing again," but on the other hand, it's a way of learning, about new allies and about different kinds of projects that are exciting. So yeah, I appreciate the challenge, and I'm kind of used to it; September's a hard time of year.

LP: It's refreshing too, because most of the time, some projects are very mainstream. Like if you just thought of this in an accident, it's already something. But for this exhibition, you really pushed us to think and go beyond what is generally accepted as being so amazing, "Oh, you finally saw this (*unintelligible*) disabled people; that's so amazing."

KS: Yeah, you don't get anywhere.

LP: Yeah, exactly.

AC: It seems like you're saying there's been more of a critical push in this exhibition. So that's good; that's what I was hoping. And also with the audio description layer, I think that is also a very intentional, conceptual push coming from me to get the artists to think beyond the way that they might usually create and frame a work. And even though I realize that perhaps I can work with artists differently on this project in the future, you know, because the audio description is very time-consuming, and is very difficult actually, I think; it's a skill that has to be developed over time, and so that is also something that I need to think more about, and how to collaborate with others on that aspect of making work. But in any case, I'm going to end the interview now,

but thank you so much for participating and being a part of this interview and being a part of this project.

KS: Thank you for the opportunity.