



## CRITICAL COMMENTARY

### Staging Bodies, Performing Ramps: Cultural-Aesthetic Disability Technoscience

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I am a disabled dancer and choreographer; I dance in a wheelchair, in a wheelchair with crutches, and without either. Interpreting disability as a creative aesthetic allows me to work the tension between impairment-specific movement vocabularies and mainstream dance techniques. My practice frequently investigates connections between movement and the visual arts. Sometimes, my dances address Western canonical artists. Sometimes, I feature the community conversations and traditions of disabled artists/artists of color. In all my work, technology—bodily, access, digital, architectural—becomes a provocation that I believe should maximize the expression of impairment not normalize, erase, or overcome what designers see as limitations.

In many regards, my solo and group practices are easily recognized as instances of what Aimi Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch (2019) define in the introduction to this issue as *crip technoscience*. My collaborative of disabled artists, *Kinetic Light*, features disabled people in lead creative positions; our

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commitment to disability culture and aesthetics is a defining principle. In my solo practice and in my work with Kinetic Light, access, in all its complexities, is an aesthetic in the work itself as well as a way of building a relationship with our audience. It is an invitation to relationship, not a checklist of things to be done. We immerse ourselves in the tensions of complex accessibility and the ongoing necessity of our own learning, while recognizing the potential for field-wide change and accepting the ramifications of pushing such work forward in the field of dance. I believe in the ideals of disability justice, as articulated by Patty Berne, Mia Mingus, and the Sins Invalid collective.

That said, I find myself reluctant to commit unreservedly to crip technoscience as a name for what I do. My work engages technology, but it also is dedicated to intersectional disability culture and aesthetics. I think of cultural-aesthetic technoscience as a way of naming a practice that is rooted in and speaks to the ideas and work of other disabled culture makers. I make art where disability, in its many manifestations, is sometimes the content and always the aesthetic. I see technology not as a device or product, but as a body of knowledge (*scientia*) and a way of producing, developing, sharing, and accessing it (*techne*) that are held both individually and in community. This retro scholarly move of using definitions decenters acknowledged academic fields of science and technology, places disability culture and aesthetics in the center of scholarly conversations about access, disability identity, politics, and technology, and opens a space for the expert embodied cultural and aesthetic wisdoms that technoscience all too frequently moves to the margins.<sup>1</sup>

For this essay, I choose a presentation of two moving pictures: one on technology and embodiment and the other on dance, access, and architecture. Alison Kafer (personal communication, August 30, 2018) challenges me to consider the form of this essay, provoking me to view disability, race, and gender as lenses on linear, purposeful academic argument. The passage from one section to the other is a conceptual bridge: a discussion of the GIF, a literal moving image, as an access

practice in itself. This transition functions as a liminal space, a place where the values of sections one and two can be examined.

## Bodies



Figure 1. Alice Sheppard in *Where Good Souls Fear*. Alice Sheppard, seated in her wheelchair, holds two forearm crutches in a cross in front of her body. Her spine arches as she looks behind herself. The photo is a mirror reflection. As Alice looks back, her crutches seem to disappear into each other in a seamless touchpoint. Photo credit: Lisa Niedermeyer.

In *Where Good Souls Fear*, I dance in my chair with forearm crutches, with crutches and on my knees, and without any body technologies. I see all three as unified, working bodies, responsive to the built environment, mutable over time, and reconfigurable at my choreographic whim.<sup>2</sup>

The crutch and chair form is clearly an artistically designed body—emerging from disability culture and aesthetics—not because no one is born into a chair and crutches, but because in the world of impairment functional

design no one needs both kinds of mobility technologies at once. In fact, this doubling of technology rather denies its functional purpose in that it significantly restricts movement. In this form, mine is a disabled body disarticulated from medical need. Countering the normative and medicalized understanding of the relationships between design, technology, and movement, this body is supplicant only to desire and a simultaneous urge to revel in the excess of disability.

My crutches are superb technical design—carbon fiber, ergonomic, and with rotating articulating feet. To sidestep the dichotomy of “crutch” as a negative figurative support and “crutch” as positive movement enabler, I made them functionally useless—for walking—by making them too short to stand up “straight.” This choreographic use also inhibits the prescribed function of both my wheelchair (arms are in crutches: pushing is impossible) and my crutches (body is in chair: no need to walk, plus crutches are the wrong size).<sup>3</sup> However, the reduced size and new embodiment drive artistic expression: I use the crutches as outriggers, balance points, and percussion instruments. My wheelchair becomes a spinning piece of architecture rather than a device for locomotion, and my body reveals a new and complex form. The unexpectedness of my appearance is a provocation that emphasizes

the movement of my wheels and extends my fleshly lines.



Figure 2. Alice Sheppard in *Where Good Souls Fear*. Alice Sheppard, holding two forearm crutches, swings her arms in large circles and drums the casters of her wheelchair fiercely into the ground. Then, she uses the crutches to balance first to one side then on the other. Her arms make large diagonal shapes in the air. GIF credit: Lisa Niedermeyer. [ For GIF please see HTML version of this article.]

The alien use of crutch technology caused one audience member to approach me after a performance saying that I should be in a movie as a “trained assassin.” I must have looked confused; she continued, explaining that I handled “those pipes so well.” The “pipes,” I responded, were in fact crutches. Unshaken, she replied that she would “pay to see a movie in which [I] play a trained assassin.”

As I mull over the semantic and functional distance between “crutch” as prop or support technology and “crutch” as initiator of movement, I recognize that my work is another manifestation of the disability culture and history that are rooted in the generative gap between literal and figurative meaning. The popular use of *crutch* is always negative, suggesting that the

thing being used as a crutch is unnecessary or undesirable. I open my body to this desire, finding that the length of my arms with crutches feels integrated, dare I even say “normal” to me. Because I do not use them for support, my crutches become wings that interpret the sensation of flight. To this particular viewer, however, the length of my arms is alienating; my wingspan extends over nine feet into the air.<sup>4</sup> These cannot be arms. Their length contravenes the laws of nature. My crutches become a different technology: her killer pipes.

### **Access, Aesthetics, Sharing**

Embedded in this essay are two GIFs or animated images. On social media, GIFs are pithy, visual ways of expressing an emotional reaction. In my practice, GIFs have become an essential part of our accessible communication. Lisa Niedermeyer is a producer for my work and a creative conversation partner. In one of her roles, she thinks about storytelling: How do we accessibly share the story of my work and not just the work itself? The mainstream dance world often communicates, inaccessibly, in video. This is, in part, a function of the difficulties of creating adequate description for dance and, in part, a consequence of a lack of awareness around access practices such as description. Lisa has begun using GIF files as a critical storytelling device. GIFs emerge from a keen understanding of the core of an expression and are edited to communicate its essence, if not its full detail.

Lisa (personal communication, October 26, 2018) writes, Selecting and describing an animated image (GIF) rather than a still image comes from the desire to illustrate the essential kinetics in Alice's dancing that can be missed entirely if we don't have the imagination to fill in what happens just before and after a photographed moment. Moving beyond the captured moment is essential for opening both non-disabled and disabled people beyond their previous experiences of wheeled movement. Selecting and

describing an animated image (GIF) rather than a video excerpt is very much about choosing a movement idea that can be illustrated verbally and visually with equity. Trying to describe a thirty-second dance clip that has multiple edits in it is difficult: there is a lot of visual information to convey. An animated GIF asks us to be intentional about what we select as the most relevant part of the movement.

I enjoy the prompts: What moments of the choreography stick with you long after the experience of the dance? What movements would the audience want to replay or re-taste in their minds and bodies? A GIF on repeat makes sense to me. I listen to audience members for when they make sounds in response to certain movements and note those as possible animated images. Someday, I imagine augmented reality excerpts of movement, so we can relate to choreography taking place in front of us at our own scale of body size.

### **Access, Performing, Stages**

Named by Sara Hendren (n.d.) as one of Galileo's simple machines (the inclined plane), the ramp is an overlooked technology now often dedicated to facilitating the transition between one level and the next without the use of a step. Richly present in architecture from Ancient Greece to twentieth-century modern, interior and exterior ramps gracefully circled buildings and smoothed the passage from one part of a building to another...until they became accessibility ramps, designed for wheelchair users.

Suddenly, these desirable, central architectural features were hidden behind walls, moved to the back of buildings, fabricated cheaply without much regard for the equality of user experience, and designed with little or no attention to aesthetics or pleasure of use. Yes, they ensured our entrances and exits, but they isolated us, denied us the company of our lovers and friends, and robbed us of the very pleasures that wheels offer: the joy of the freedom of a descent and pleasure in the labor of ascent.<sup>5</sup>

Ramps oriented to compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) are not the architectural ramps of the Oscar Niemeyer Niterói Contemporary Art Museum, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Le Corbusier's houses, James Stirling's Neue Staatsgalerie, Grand Central Station, etc.

Like so many other wheelchair users, I am frustrated with the access ramp.<sup>6</sup> Architectural ramps release such pleasurable movement for me; access ramps are almost uniformly utterly unpleasant. I longed to soar in dance on a ramp that would give me movement pleasure. What if desire became a design that maximized the expression of impairment? Could cultural-aesthetic disability technoscience sculpt a ramp?

In my work, access and art are less about accessibility for audience and artist, but about access as art and aesthetic. The set for *DESCENT*, an evening-length dance duet, transforms the access ramp into a work of art, demonstrating how Kinetic Light imagines access as aesthetic. My intellectual and political understandings of ramps and access informed my ideas for *DESCENT*, but the act of yielding to movement desire created the art. When ADA-compliance-oriented designers refused the project—wheelchair users would be unsafe, needed the protection of railings, could not use a ramp that was not an access ramp—Sara Hendren, Yevgeniya Zastavker, and a team of Olin College students designed the sculptural ramp stage set.

This ramp is not a “ramp.” The students designed for beauty and for the potential of wheeled movement. Riotously and “aesthetically non-compliant with the ADA,” as Rosemarie Garland-Thompson (personal communication, July 30, 2016) puts it, this ramp is sensual, glorious, and inviting. As the *DESCENT* ramp made its debut in New York, wheelchair users called it #rampporn: a ramp fantasy fulfilling every chair user's dream, encouraging every ramp desire, seductive yet unattainable. One of the ironies of *DESCENT* is that the ramp can be accessed only by people involved in the show. Its inaccessibility strengthens its mystique and beauty; its beauty and rebelliousness hint at risk and danger. The scent of danger



makes the ramp irresistible.

The ramp is inscrutable.

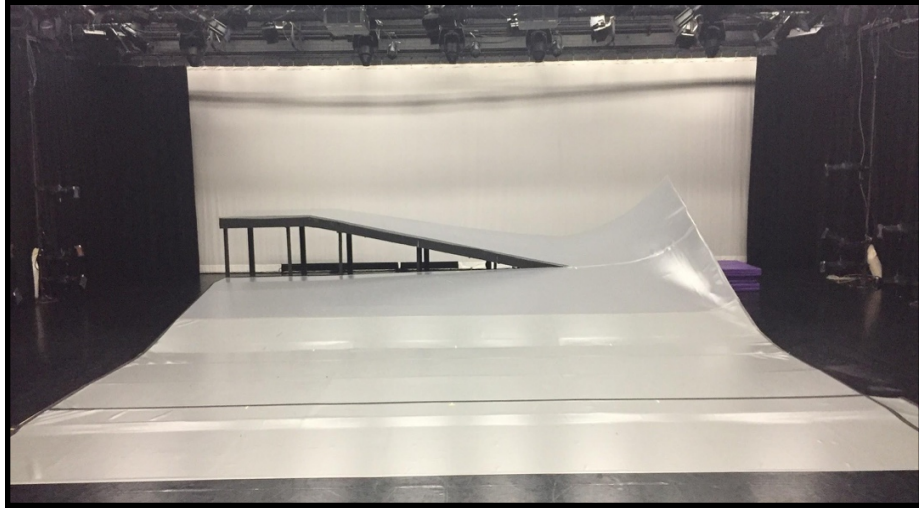


Figure 3. *DESCENT* Ramp Works Lights. Dressed in shiny gray marley, the curvaceous *DESCENT* ramp sits in a theater. Overhead, rows of stage lights can be seen. A white projection screen is behind the ramp, and various black and purple mats are visible. Without dancers and stage lights, the ramp gleams. Photo credit: Lisa Niedermeyer.



Figure 4. *DESCENT* ramp animation GIF. Set against a black and white starscape, the *DESCENT* ramp, a sculpture with sensual curves, sharp points, steep slope, and a platform, is lit in a sweeping diagonal of rocky terrain. Beams of light ooze across its surface, delineating the borders of different areas of the ramp. Light and projections by Michael Maag. GIF credit: Lisa Niedermeyer. [ For GIF please see HTML version of this article.]

The very movement vocabulary of *DESCENT* is created by the interaction of wheels, ramp, and physics of momentum. Again, disability art emerges from the gap of literal and figurative. Modern dancers repeatedly call the floor a partner, but the artistic reality of that fact usually does not manifest in their work. The *DESCENT* ramp is an active partner in the dance: its slopes and curves render the dancers utterly vulnerable to gravity. The dancers use momentum and torque to create new lifts and moves; the ramp's slopes teach us new techniques, challenging the "pedestrian" practice of wheeling on the flats, at once penetrating the

horizon/glass ceiling of wheeled movement for dancers and expanding our community's knowledge of how wheels work.<sup>7</sup> *DESCENT* imagines the ramp as an art object immersed in disability culture rather than as a tool that serves or assists disabled people; it interprets disability culture as art, and the technologies of wheelchair and ramp become aesthetic in their own right.

This is cultural-aesthetic disability technoscience.



Figure 5. *DESCENT*: Flying. Set against a black and white starscape and the *DESCENT* ramp, Laurel Lawson in her wheelchair balances on the footplate of Alice Sheppard's wheelchair. Lawson spreads her arms and looks down at Alice; Alice curves her arms and arches up towards Laurel. Photo credit: Jay Newman, courtesy Peter Britt Arts and Music Festival.

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drafts. Thank you, Aimi Hamraie, for the generous invitation to contribute to this issue.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> While my academic training is in Medieval Studies, my point here is not to assert the primacy of philology, but to allow etymology to make an intervention. That said, studying usage is an important part of my artistic practice: the gaps between contemporary usage, traces of historical record, morphology, and etymology often reveal critical insights that I then use to frame my movement.

<sup>2</sup> *Where Good Souls Fear* and *Doors*, my other piece in this form, are connected to disability dance, aesthetic, and cultural histories in particular through the work of Lisa Bufano (1972-2013). In *One Breath Is an Ocean for a Wooden Heart*, Bufano and Sonsheree Giles push the notion of prosthetic legs by dancing on four twenty-eight-inch wooden stilts. Bufano describes the stilts as “tools,” but the dance reveals how tools become body.

<sup>3</sup> Responding to the life experience of SideStix company co-founder, amputee Sarah Doherty, the company’s marketing causally connects this “adaptive” “mobility enhancing” technology with “regain(ed) independence” (SideStix, n.d.). I wonder what they would make of my use. Here, I also acknowledge the homeless man I saw in the snowy winter of 2005 making use of this dual technology. The ingenuity of his movement has stayed with me.

<sup>4</sup> Disability art makes great play with the notion of arm’s length: I think to Mat Fraser’s *Sealo* and performance personas; to Sunaura Taylor’s *Self Portrait with Manatee*; and to Lezlie Frye’s performances in Heidi Latsky’s *GIMP*. *Doors* and *Where Good Souls Fear* are part of this tradition.

<sup>5</sup> I have been writing about my experience with ramps since 2006, but found clarity and community around the importance of equality of experience in Linton (2006, pp. 172-193). *DESCENT* is underpinned by this chapter, Linton, S and von Tippelskirch, C, (Co-directors) (2014) *Invitation to Dance*, and our ongoing conversations.

<sup>6</sup> As part of my work on *DESCENT*, I held three Twitter chats around the #rampfail; they reveal the deep unhappiness of the disability community as a whole (not just wheelchair users) with their daily ramp encounters.

<sup>7</sup> *Pedestrian* here is both ironic and a term of art in the dance world for contemporary movement practices that emphasize everyday “untrained” movement. I use it with keen awareness that while interest in “pedestrian” movement allowed disabled dancers to enter the studio, that interest also limits contemporary understandings of what disabled dancers can do. Our untrained and, to the mainstream, untrainable bodies revealed new movement and possibilities that some dancers have eagerly welcomed. At the same time, this acceptance of everyday movement has led to the assumption that disabled dancers cannot be trained. I do not believe that disabled dancers cannot be trained; I believe the mainstream dance world has yet to perform the rigorous examination of its training principles and techniques that would enable a disabled dancer to succeed.

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## Bio

**Alice Sheppard** is the founder and artistic lead for Kinetic Light, a project based collaborative working at the intersections of architecture, dance, design, identity, and technology to show how mobility - literal, physical,

and conceptual - is fundamental to the conceptualization of civic life. An award-winning choreographer, Alice creates movement that challenges conventional understandings of disabled and dancing bodies by intentionally engaging intersectional disability arts, culture and history.