Briefing to the Privy Council of Canada

Roundtable on The Socio-Economic Impacts of Disruptive Technology: Opportunities and Challenges

Dr. Carla Rice, Canada Research Chair
Founding Director
Re•Vision: The Centre for Art and Social Justice

Principal Investigator, Bodies in Translation: Activist Art, Technology, and Access to Life – SSHRC Partnership Grant

Overview: Bodies in Translation (BIT)

Bodies in Translation: Activist Art, Technology, and Access to Life (BIT) is a 7-year Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada-funded project that generates collaborative partnerships between artists, arts organizations, activists, scholars, and educators. We cultivate activist art produced by disabled, d/Deaf, fat, Mad, and E/elder people with the goals of expanding understandings of vitality and advancing social justice. BIT sets in motion a creative and intellectual wave of leading-edge technological innovation, artistic creation research, and critical inquiry within and beyond Ontario. Bodies in Translation blends theories and practices of disability, feminism, and community arts to explore how, and to what ends, we can cultivate arts that re-figure how we see and understand non-normatively embodied people.

BIT is comprised of five streams at function, together, as collaborative and creative efforts toward answering the questions that ground that grant's activities—questions about whose social and cultural production is valued, who is seen as fully human in a society built upon layers of barriers to access, and what kinds of resistance stem from historically marginalized, non-normatively embodied groups and individuals. These streams are:

1. Archiving and Historicizing the Arts: Recollecting Histories of Difference
    - Focused on gathering and creating archives, both digital and physical, to increase the recognition, visibility, and valuing of disability and activist art as well as encouraging continued investment in artistic production
2. Accessing the Arts: Technological Innovation and Aesthetic Possibilities
    - Designed to interrogate the inaccessibility of artistic spaces to non-normatively embodied individuals and invite training, production, curation, and other opportunities that place disability and difference at the centre
3. Cultivating the Arts: Aesthetics and Artistic Development
    - Explores methods of propelling disability and activist art forward, supporting the development of an aesthetic of disability and difference that challenges engrained power structures
4. Activating the Arts: Arts and/as Activism

- Investigates how art, activism, and social change are interconnected and co-productive, using the concept of “activism” to scaffold a deep exploration of how social justice movements overlap and intersect and inform the ways that life and vitality are imagined

5. Mobilizing the Arts: Research and Pedagogical Possibilities
    - Sharing insights about the pedagogical potentials of disability and activist art by disseminating knowledge generated throughout the grant in multimedia, interactive ways, including through the development of a knowledge platform that will invite engagement from a broad range of stakeholders in ways that correspond with different needs and desires

We now have legislation in the province of Ontario, the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disability Act (AODA), which seeks to make Ontario fully accessible by 2025. In addition, consultations for the development of federal accessibility legislation are well underway. While such legislation will do much to advance inclusion, the law cannot legislate understanding, cultural recognition, or welcoming in. This is what art and cultural production do. Without being didactic, rhetorical or moralizing, art can open dialogue about highly charged and difficult topics. Our grant gives opportunities for non-normatively embodied individuals and communities to imagine themselves into the representational field and to be seen as cultural providers. This is urgent as many impactful legal and policy decisions—from physician assisted suicide to elder care policies to obesity prevention, for example—are being made with limited public understanding about precisely what is at stake for those most affected. Bodies in Translation thus tackles the question of how art and technology offer new ways of imagining non-normatively embodied people as contributors to the vitality and well-being of communities. In this way, access to cultural production, representation, participation, and engagement reflects access to life itself.

Bodies in Translation is situated in Ontario, with many of our activities occurring on the traditional territories of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples. In response to the call to decolonize research, our project engages Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics, artists, educators and publics working at the nexus of at least two intersections between Indigeneity and disability. First, we recognize that colonization processes are implicated in increased rates of impairment in Indigenous communities and nations. These range from psychological impairments caused by intergenerational trauma to physical disabilities related to unsafe living conditions and lack of access to preventive and primary health care. Second, Indigenous communities grapple with Western cultural logics for understanding and responding to disabilities including negative attitudes that infantilize and frame disabled people as unproductive, lacking vitality, and expendable. Bodies in Translation aims not only to think through these connections via the arts but also to investigate through creative research how our governments historically have responded to disabled and Indigenous bodies in similar ways including through institutional confinement (residential schools, institutions for people living with disabilities). Such practices, we know, have had and continue to have negative effects for the creation and intergenerational transfer of culture, a situation that this grant helps to redress through our partnerships with Indigenous scholars and researchers, Elders and artists.

Our grant is a research program of Re•Vision: The Centre for Art and Social Justice at the University of Guelph and expands upon our partnership with Tangled Art + Disability, a not for profit arts organization and forum for creative and artistic excellence that serves as a national and international leader, catalyst and resource for bringing together professional artists, emerging artists and arts and cultural organizations and a diverse public. Dr. Carla Rice (Canada Research Chair in Care, Gender, and Relationships, University of Guelph) is the Principal Investigator of the Bodies in Translation grant, and she co-leads this initiative with Dr. Eliza Chandler (School of Disability Studies, Ryerson University, and former Artistic Director at Tangled Art + Disability).

Technology and Access to Life

Technology is often framed as *disruptive* in one of two ways—as *destructive* or as *productive* of material well-being and of new possibilities. We suggest that technology might disrupt in either of these ways but that the direction of its disruptive effects—positive or negative—might depend on who designs the technology and to what ends. We propose a reimagining of the value of technology for access and inclusion, moving away from a perspective that positions technology as providing the means to *erase*, *hide or invisibilize* disability and difference toward one that values the insights and experiences of people with embodied difference. Here, people with disabilities become co-designers in the development of technology and even more, use such technology to bring disability to the fore: to invite the disruption that disability introduces into the social and cultural landscape. This conceptualization of the value of technology to enable access and inclusion is not immediately obvious; thus, we offer an example of how technology might invite, rather than erase or make invisible, disability and difference, and how this might provoke new ways of thinking and being.

Recently, Tangled Art + Disability co-presented a retrospective by renowned Canadian video artist Deirdre Logue, with Images Festival, Gallery 44, and A Space Gallery entitled “Admiring All We Accomplish” (co-produced by Bodies in Translation). The exhibition anticipated audiences of individuals with and without disabilities so in designing the exhibition the question of how best to use technology to allow for people with diverse experiences of the sensory world arose. One approach to the challenge of creating and curating art for access and inclusion is to make disability blend in seamlessly through the use of technological innovations. We have at our fingertips devices that enable access through disguising disability; Bluetooth devices that fit into ears without being seen, for instance, allow for audio description of art pieces. However, this approach does not acknowledge the value that disability brings to art—the way that disability requires a re-imagining of art itself and how it is both created and observed.

Instead of using subtle, invisibilizing technologies to enable access, artist Deirdre Logue opted to collaborate with David Bobier, founder of VibraFusionLab, to develop technological extensions of the artwork itself which became a vital part of the exhibition. VibraFusionLab “is a development lab, educational centre, and presentation space where artists from around the world merge to add the sense of touch to their

performances and works"[1]. Together with Bobier and VibraFusionLab, Logue brought both technological innovation and disability to the centre of the exhibition. This choice transformed the experience for all audiences by integrating disability into the fabric of the artwork. It brought audience members into the exhibition by inviting "multi-sensorial exchanges between the audience and the work"[2]. For instance, audience members could hold or sit or stand on devices that provided vibrational experiences of the video installations, provoking engagement with the art on a tactile level.

Disability Futures and Technology

This example also brings to light the ways in which reorienting to disability allows us to reorient to the future. The proliferation of assistive technologies may seem, on the surface, to be a positive way of promoting access and inclusion; many people living with disabilities enjoy and make use of assistive technologies[3] and we would not argue against their innovation and availability. Simply creating new assistive technologies, however, does not change the social context in which disability is presented as problematically disruptive, and people with disabilities presented as passive consumers of technologies designed to mimic "normal" interactions with the world. Assistive technologies may allow attitudinal, social, and physical barriers to access and negative representations of disability to persist unexamined[4].

Through technology, people with disabilities may be written out of the future—that is, a future without disability or one where the erasure of disability (through assistive technology) is presented as more desirable. This compounds the existing presumption that a disabled future is not one worth imagining, a contention we argue excludes people with disabilities as well as misses the productive potential of imagining the future otherwise[5]. By constructing the future as only accessible to those whose bodies and minds are perceived as able, we limit the possibility to envision alternative worlds[6]. Rather, by creating technologies by, for and with people with disabilities we invest in technologies that are productively disruptive, and begin to "imagine a world where things, time, identities, and differences are arranged differently"[7].

How do we produce this kind of technology?

- We work together with people with a variety of disabilities and differences to ensure that technologies attend to actual, rather than imagined, needs and desires

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[1] VibraFusion Lab: http://www.vibrafusionlab.com/?page_id=21

[2] Admiring all we accomplish: https://vimeo.com/227962562

[3] Jette, A. (2017). The promise of assistive technology to enhance work participation. *Physical Therapy, 97*(7), 691-692.

[4] Bodil, R. & Söderström, S. (2017). *Disability, society, and assistive technology.* Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

[5] Rice, C., Chandler, E., Rinaldi, J., Changfoot, N., Liddiard, K., Mykitiuk, R. & Mündel, I. (2017). Imagining disability futurities. Hypatia, 32(2), 213-229.

[6] Kafer, A. (2013). Feminist, queer, crip. Bloomington: Indiana University Press

[7] Rice et al., 2017, p. 228

- We move beyond legal or procedural approaches to accessibility (though these are critically important) toward collaborative and dynamic practices of inclusiveness (e.g. inclusive design[8])
- We consider the links between art and technology: rather than simply attending to access, we recognize the aesthetic experience of the world when designing technologies that are inclusive
- We recognize disability, and people with disabilities, as important cultural producers, rather than passive consumers, with whom exciting and innovative approaches to access might be imagined
- We understand that access to technology provides access to cultural production, representation, participation, and engagement and is a reflection of access to life itself

As an example, we are making use of co-design processes[9] that bring together stakeholders, including people with various embodied differences, together to imagine the possibilities (in terms of form and content) of a knowledge platform for BIT. This platform, designed to engage teachers, learners, artists, activists, audiences, policy makers, and others, is being collaboratively developed in order to explore the questions raised in our grant and in this briefing; questions of access, inclusion, and artful approaches to life. Projects like these allow us to explore ways of centralizing difference and disability as important ways of presenting alternative futures through disrupting the status quo. Here, technology, art, and access to life converge to generate dynamic and exciting possible futures, rewriting the ways in which technologies have been inscribed onto bodily difference.

[8] See the Inclusive Design Research Centre (IDRC) at the Ontario College of Art and Design University for more information about inclusive design: https://idrc.ocadu.ca/. The IDRC is a central partner on the Bodies in Translation grant.

[9] Somerville, M.M. & Nino, M. (2007). Collaborative co-design: A user-centric approach for advancement of organizational learning. *Performace Measurement Metrics, 8*(3), 180-188.