

Curatorial Essay

by Mason Smart

Throughout *Transformative Access: Activating Disability Desires*, Harmeet Rehal, Sunshine Torme Johnson, and Hollis McConkey share visions of magnificence, through process and product. Writer and educator Mia Mingus describes the magnificence of the disabled body-mind, separating this quality from a conception of beauty bound up in adherence to abled, white supremacist bodily norms.

Mingus elaborates through examples:

“...The magnificence of a body that shakes, spills out, takes up space, needs help, moseys, slinks, limps, drools, rocks, curls over on itself. The magnificence of a body that doesn’t get to choose when to go to the bathroom, let alone which bathroom to use. A body that doesn’t get to choose what to wear in the morning, what hairstyle to sport, how they’re going to move or stand, or what time they’re going to bed.” (2021)

Her concept could be understood as the recognition and appreciation in others of manifestations of being born into meaning through struggle.



Something I’ve learned this summer is that rules and norms serve to control and manage large groups of people, but on the individual, interpersonal scale, rules can be bent according to the risk associated with bending them and the readiness of the individuals involved to meet that risk. Both as a camp counselor and curator, flexibility and patience have allowed me to figure out how to bend these rules—whether rules about making noise during a presentation, or around hard deadlines—in a way that allows a sense of freedom in the interactions between myself and those involved in a project.

This reflection brings me to the idea of access intimacy, coined by writer and educator Mia Mingus and described by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha in a conversation with Stacey Park Milbern as a facet of crip wealth: the bounty of knowledge that the disabled experience affords and the gift of being witnessed and cared for, or given the space to experience the fullness of their disabled experience by other disabled people, namely around access needs. Piepzna-Samarasinha notes that this intimacy can be cultivated through a practice of noticing, respectful inquiry and valuing of disabled knowledges. (2024)

Harmeet Rehal's *ਪੀੜੀ/Pidi as grounding (ਮੰਜਾ/Manjas as Mobility Aids)*, 2023, is an example of this witnessing in action. Rehal responds to an access need they've identified through creation of an intervention that is not just practical, but a bright intervention in space due to the presence of the disabled person who requires and uses it. Because of the creativity engendered by an experience of disability, a new option for reuse of milk crates and fabric becomes possible, and the reality of the diversity of disabled experiences and lineages can be made visible in abled spaces that may also be monocultural.

Piepzna-Samarasinha names the ability to “expand” in their reflection on crip wealth. This permission to take up space is mobilized by the brightness of the Pidi, and their conspicuous ethic of reuse. as well as their ability to be connected into a larger seating area. The design refuses the extractive colonial norm that would see disability marginalized due to how it makes clear the necessity of being witnessed, and the corresponding care that would contravene extractive ethics that see productivity as a body's main function.

The labour performed by disabled people is often undervalued. Rehal's work also puts a fine point on valuing labour that has been distanced from its product, namely that put into creating the sari fabric and milk crate, by giving them a new life. Labour can be understood in relation to disability as ‘effort’ or energy expended for a purpose, as opposed to its meaning in relation to productivity, where energy is expended to meet a certain goal. That energy is only seen as valuable if it meets that goal. Labour through this lens of “Energy expended for a purpose” is not tied to accomplishment, but rather to the motions of living with a disability. When grounded through a lens of crip wealth that prizes the wisdom of these experiences, the actions of living can be holistically valued outside of productivity value.

Hollis McConkey's work further considers the labour performed by people with disabilities. Her work, in-progress at the time of writing, will meditate on the labour of being stuck in a loop of skin picking. Energy here is expended through emotions like frustration, through the space it holds for creativity, and through the physical act of skin picking. A disability-informed perspective on labour does not put a value on expending energy for a use that is not explicitly productive. Rather, it radically and neutrally accepts the continuum of purposes for which energy can be spent. Honouring McConkey's production time is another access intervention, allowing the artist to have the time and space outside of abled constructs of acceptable timelines to create work, something enabled by remaining in conversation with the artists to make space for accommodation. The rebellious quality of eschewing external time frames deepens the

disruptive power of disability art, and its resistance to forms of productivity that require extraction of energy rather than it being given freely with full consent of its boundaries.

Sunshine Torme Johnson's work, *Home to Heal*, 2023, emphasizes the necessity of accessible housing to support the wellbeing of people with disabilities. Johnson writes,

"Home To Heal" captures a profound moment of ancestral spiritual practice, illustrating the power of manifestation in a form of Afro-Caribbean spirituality. The image depicts a ritual where individuals inscribe their deepest intentions onto a bay leaf with a marker, igniting it to invoke the assistance of spirits in realizing these desires.

For me, this ritual held profound significance during a period of housing instability, marked by a relentless cycle of couch-surfing among friends and strangers. Struggling to meet basic physical needs, I found traditional Western psychology lacking in addressing the core issue of stable housing. Despite the well-meaning efforts of counselors, their support often felt inadequate, offering little more than what felt like meaningless affirmations and coping strategies that were inaccessible given my circumstances.

What I truly required, and still do, is a place of refuge—a sanctuary where I can store food, belongings, and find solace in a bed of my own. Beyond mere shelter, this entails a space that ensures both emotional and physical safety, providing the stability essential for healing.

In "Home To Heal," I captured a pivotal moment of hope and resilience, as I boldly claimed the necessity of stable housing to navigate the mental and physical perils of homelessness. This photograph encapsulates a journey towards survival, where the act of manifestation becomes a beacon of healing amidst adversity. (Johnson)

Johnson connects spirituality to resistance and sees it as a strategy for accessing and maintaining wellbeing outside of often inaccessible Western wellness models in his digital illustration *Water Being*, 2023. He describes the healing power of the water to transform the psyche and the duality of its healing property and awareness of the colonial violence that makes Lake Ontario accessible to the present-day people of Toronto. The fantastical form of the Water Being and its transness evoke the body's mutability, and ground that in the water as a natural form that is ontologically mutable, and forces beings to work with this unchanging quality. This can serve as a one of many

conceptual grounds for disability pride as well as a challenge for settlers to re-create intimate and holistic connections with the land and water to ensure their survival; the learnings, such as the importance of awareness and reciprocity, from creating these connections with ever-changing entities can promote disabled wellbeing. Johnson's holistic approach channels magnificence in its expansive connection of Land and Water to his experience of disability, invoking interconnected struggle and the range of autonomies that are present within the natural world.

Rehal, McConkey, and Johnson meet the question, "what can disability do to...?", as asked by Day Heisinger-Nixon, filling in that final blank with propositions for labour, sustainability, relationships and decolonial action.

Works Cited

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