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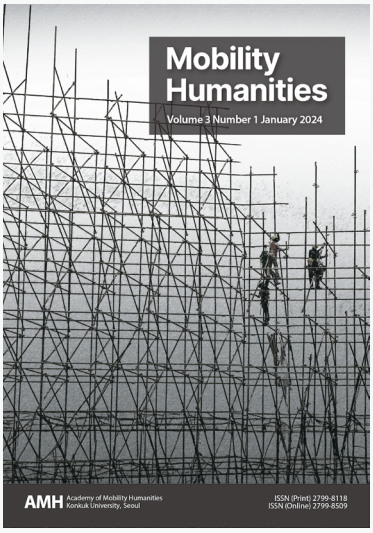

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SPECIAL ISSUE

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SPECIAL ISSUE

Doing Disability-mobility Research through Creative Practice: Participating in a Community Art Exhibition

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Abstract

This paper builds on the work in the fields of mobility and art to discuss the contribution of an ongoing collaboration between a self-identified queer, Deaf, and disabled art practitioner, Asphyxia, and two non-disabled geographers. The paper captures our collaboration in the context of a participatory art project and exhibition called *Wheel-Ability* aimed at addressing everyday ableism and accessing public space. We draw on the concept of kin-aesthetics in creative practice and online/digital conversations to understand powered wheelchair movement and advocate for mobility justice. Our discussion is structured into two sections: questioning creative practice and advocating for mobility justice. The first discusses how Asphyxia's creative practice aim, as a visual artist, is for self-expression and to connect with others through the experiences of viewing her art. The second offers a collaborative critical analysis of two paintings Asphyxia contributed to the exhibition titled: *Sorry, the Lifestyle You Ordered Has Expired* and *The Frustrations of Horizontal Living*. Through collaboration with disabled artists, creative methods can enhance the appreciation of the sensory in shaping the reciprocal relationship between mobility infrastructure, self, journeys, and mobility justice.

Keywords

Ableism, Affect, Assemblage Thinking, Embodiment, Mobility Justice, Powered Mobility Devices

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Introduction

> I have many experiences that could potentially be expressed but which I have not found the right artform for. (Asphyxia, Follow-up Conversation)

This paper is about an ongoing collaboration between Asphyxia, a self-identified Deaf, queer, and chronically ill artist, writer, and activist, and two non-disabled geographers. Asphyxia has an international reputation as an artist, writer, advocate, and motivational speaker. Her paintings draw on her intersectional experiences, including orthostatic intolerance, to challenge political, economic, and social factors that shape public mobility infrastructure, which often assumes an ambulant or driving body. The geographers produce research on the sensibilities of movement, specifically the relationship between mobility, self, and place. The artist and the geographers shared a mutual concern with revealing social injustice through everyday experiences of journeys. This is why Asphyxia initially started talking to the geographers through consenting to participatory ethnographic fieldwork in Ballina, New South Wales, that involved creative practices to investigate mobility experiences. Enthused by the incorporation of creative practices in the research design, participants requested a public art exhibition to communicate their mobility experiences. This is how Asphyxia became part of the art exhibition titled *Wheel-Ability*, and how the authors then came to work together on this paper about exploring creative practice and disability mobility justice.

The last decade has witnessed a growing interest in creative practices in mobility scholarship (Witzgall et al.; Merriman and Pearce; Kjaerulff et al.; Barry and Keane, *Creative Measures of the Anthropocene*; Barry et al.). This work has illustrated how mobility scholarship may be enlivened by creative based research, including engagement with fiction (Culbert), photography (Clarsen), poetry (Davidson), film (Archer), dance (Veal, "Micro-bodily Mobilities"; Duffy et al.), sound (Pinder), locative media art (Southern) and artwork (Barry and Keane, "Moving within Mobilities"; Barry et al.). Drawing on a range of more-than-human approaches, creative practice-based research offers insights into not only representation of mobility, but also to how mobility is performed and experienced. This article builds on previous research that views disability experiences of everyday mobility as a site of creativity rather than solely a medical diagnosis or socio-spatial effect of discrimination (Tan and Anderson; Veal; Duffy et al.; Rose).

This article is based on three related premises. The first concerns theoretical and methodological questions raised by more-than-human approaches in mobilities research, which move beyond dualist thinking (Adey et al.; Dewsbury; Bissell et al.). These approaches are associated with an interest in corporeal, material, and performative ontologies, and we

build on Deleuze and Guattari's geophilosophy to offer a nuanced understanding of the use of images in mobilities research. Assemblage thinking allows us to conceive of images as blocks of sensation with an affective intensity that is felt in bodies, rather than solely as culturally constituted geographical imaginations or sensibilities (Latham and McCormack). The sense and sensibilities of artworks are conceived as not solely based on ideas but also because of how non-conscious affective materiality is felt in bodies. Through mobile creative practices, artists engage, research and re-represent cognitive and non-cognitive, affective atmospheres, and multi-sensual ways of knowing the world.

The second premise of this article draws on Merriman and Pearce's discussion of "kin-aesthetics" as a reframing of kinaesthetics (or kinaesthesis), that is the sense of movement registered in muscles, tendons, joints, and skin. Following Merriman and Pearce, we understand "kin-aesthetic" as "movement enacted, felt, perceived, expressed, metered, choreographed, appreciated and desired" (498). Through the lens of kin-aesthetics the powered wheelchair as a technology of movement may be understood as facilitating its own practices, routines, rhythms, spaces, and sensations. As an embodied creative practice, Asphyxia's artwork offers an affective mapping that is attuned to the kin-aesthetics of powered wheelchair practices, sensations, routines, and rhythmic movement. Asphyxia's paintings offer insights into representations and experiences of mobility infrastructure, subjects, bodies, and public places on-the-move. Through her artwork, we aim to offer insights into how inclusions and exclusions are represented, felt, fashioned, and negotiated to work towards a more mobility-just vision of public spaces.

Thirdly, we use the term "disabled people" to draw on disability studies and geographies that emphasise how society, including ableism and state planning, disables people. However, as Shakespeare and Watson explain, "People are disabled both by social barriers and by their bodies" (15). Therefore, it is challenging to separate disability experiences from normative bodily standards. Thus, Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage thinking is used to reconceptualise disability-mobilities' scholarship beyond the biological/social divide and challenge able-bodied norms. Disability is seen as resulting from the affective force created by social and material relations that shape one's sense of self and the world.

Literature Review

In the last decade, the embodied qualities of the journeying mobile body have been taken seriously in mobilities research, driven by calls to think critically about the politics of mobility and movement (Sheller). Mobilities research has engaged with everyday journeys to illustrate how the mobile body's gestures operate to reproduce, reconfigure and rupture established socio-cultural norms of human movement, be that around the intersections between gender (Barrie et al.; Waitt et al.), ability (Veal, "Micro-bodily"; Feldman et al.; Waitt and Harada), race (Carpio et al.), and age (Stjernborg et al.; Waight and Yin). We do not aim

to produce an exhaustive review of the experience of everyday mobility, as this task has been taken up elsewhere (Cass and Falconbridge; Doherty). Instead, this article focuses on the gaps and possibilities foreclosed around mobility and more-than human geographical approaches to disability and creative practice. Creative practice research has contributed to disability geographies in two key ways. Firstly, it has explored the role of creative practices in the community arts sector in relation to wellbeing, such as creative art therapies (Stickley and Clift). For instance, Parr and Hall view creative art through the lens of situated embodied belonging and the yearning for recognition, emphasising the relational and recursive qualities of belonging. Secondly, Smith draws on the notion of affective atmosphere to interpret recovery-orientated wood workshops, highlighting how "atmospheres of care" emerge through the social-material relations that comprise workshop places.

Reflecting on creative practice as an intervention to challenge misconceptions about disabled people has been a sustained critical effort (Kuppers; Richards et al.; Levy et al.). In this strand, creative practices are positioned as place-making processes that have the potential to bring social transformation. As part of this, some artists have begun to engage seriously with the role that artwork can do in reimagining an abled bodied world by rendering the familiar unfamiliar. The function of artwork is not primarily a matter of representation when conceptualised as a participant in the process, politics, and practice of rethinking disability. While we never know in advance what the affective intensity of an artwork can do, this transformative potential is captured in the term "disability aesthetic" (Siebers; Williamson). Research that has creative practices as intervention at heart is characterised by collaboration with arts practitioners and reflection on what creative making involves, including responsibilities (Parr; Macpherson; Gruson-Wood).

More specifically, in the sub-field of mobility, geographical enquiry conducted by Midgelow, Duffy et al. and Veal has explored how professional dance performance might trouble ableist assumptions of the mobile body. Veal noted that the dancing body is conceived within embodied discourse "which reserves symmetrical, unassisted movement to the superior classification of aesthetic quality" ("Micro-bodily" 308). The supporters of disability dance performance argue that audiences are provided with an opportunity to question and broaden their understanding of what constitutes movement aesthetics.

Methods

Taking the lead from Kjaerulff et al. and Barry et al., we utilised a mobile creative methodological toolkit in our collaboration with Asphyxia to co-produce knowledge about disability-mobility justice. They advocated mobile creative practices because they offer an enhanced understanding of the embodied impacts of everyday journeys in co-constituting mobility, self, and place, including moments of felt exclusion and inclusion. The body-focused nature of creative practice as a mobile method allows analysis of "fleeting,

distributed, multiple, non-causal, sensory, emotional and kinaesthetic" experiences that diminish or enhance the capacity of the body to belong (Büscher et al. 1).

We conceived our collaboration during fieldwork for an Australian Research Council-funded Linkage Project with Assistive Technology Suppliers Australia. The project aimed to address disability-mobility justice by considering both structural constraints and everyday journeys. Asphyxia participated in the larger ethnographic project, including the call to participate in a community art exhibition. The art exhibition created possibilities for reflections with the geographers on the significance of how the sensual powered wheelchair body may transform understanding of public spaces. Asphyxia's artwork drew our attention to how creative practice enabled a different way to know disability-mobility and the potentials of creative practice for disability-mobility justice.

With our shared passion for disability-mobility justice, Asphyxia engaged with us over a six-month period in an email dialogue about her creative practice via a digital/online interview, a follow-up conversation, and afterwards in writing this co-authored piece. The email dialogue was structured in two parts: The first explored her creative practice, including mediums, inspiration, aim, concepts, training, attention, and labour conditions. Understanding Asphyxia's creative practice offers insights into the ways mobility infrastructure and social context shape her artistic expression. The second part focused on the composition process, selection of materials, aspects of disability represented, and the desired emotions evoked in the viewer. We have paraphrased sections of Asphyxia's answers and provided interpretive text to connect them. Each answer enables us to activate the concept of kin-aesthetics and gain insights through creative practice into powered wheelchair movement and mobility. Our focus is not on the representation of the finished artwork, but on how the creative process of image-making apprehends powered wheelchair mobility, self, and place.

Questioning Creative Practice

To begin, we asked Asphyxia to consider her choice of mediums. Asphyxia prioritises mediums that consider socially just human-environment relations, such as creative writing, visual arts, puppets, jewellery, sign singing, and music composition. Her work is inspired by the frustration with the injustice of society and a desire to explore social justice and equity as a Deaf, queer, physically disabled artist. Thinking with Deleuze and Guattari's notion of assemblage and becoming, Asphyxia's experience of dissonance or disjuncture over who she is before encountering mobility infrastructure and, who she becomes after everyday journeys, sparks questions about how the world works and opens a space for thinking, acting, and knowing differently. Thinking through the affective force of kin-aesthetics, Asphyxia's disorientation and marginalisation as a Deaf, queer person living with orthostatic intolerance becomes the condition of possibility for creativity and testimony. Asphyxia's

creative practice resonates with Ahmed's discussion of how sensations matter to make a social and political context.

Asphyxia stated that her creative practice aim as a visual artist is twofold: for self-expression, and to connect with others through a shared understanding of art and experience. This understanding of her artwork as both personal expression and a means of building social cohesion involves a certain practice of "looking" that is learnt through exposure to various artists, writers, educators, and disability rights activists (including Suzi Blu, Mary Ann Moss, Julie Arkell, Stephanie Lee and Stella Young), as well as friends.

Asphyxia wrote in response to our question "Where do you conduct your practice?":

> Mostly at home and by myself. Now I live on a large property and have a large studio at home and this is by far my preference. Some people like to separate work and life but for me a flow between activities works best. I have a lot of intrinsic motivation so don't need an external structure or accountability to work well and be productive. These days most of my art and writing and music-making is done in bed.

Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage thinking, Asphyxia's creative and political work is facilitated by the comfort and security of the socio-material arrangements that comprise her home studio. This allows her to work productively as a disabled activist from her bed. For Asphyxia, excessive movement is a strain on her energy and creativity. She must practice an ethic of restraint to recuperate her creative potential, and is attracted to moments of relative stillness that are generated by painting in bed. Moments of joy from working from her bed affirm her subjectivity as an artist through immobility.

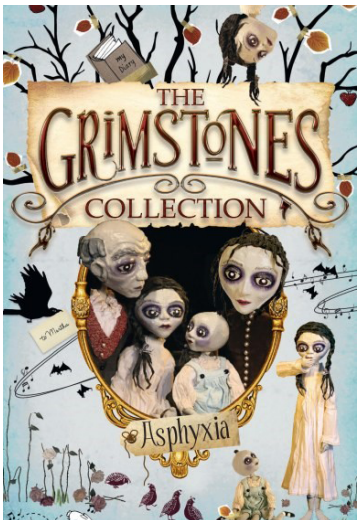

Fig. 1. Asphyxia. *The Grimstones Collection.* 2016.

Fig. 2. Asphyxia. *Future Girl*. 2020.

Asphyxia wrote that social justice had gained more importance in her work over time, and shifted the focus of commercial considerations that underpinned her earlier work, like *The Grimstones Collection* (fig. 1) and *Future Girl* (fig. 2):

> I've become more and more political. Also, I deliberately freed myself from the focus on earning money from my art (easier now that I am working from home and do not need my artwork to finance rent on a studio) which allows me to be much more creative and 'out there' with my work.

Confidence gained from the success of these earlier works supported Asphyxia to engage in advocating for mobility justice without an entirely commercial motivation.

Finally, Asphyxia wrote of how advice from a friend underscored the foundation of her creative practice as political and the role that exhibition practices can play in reimagining the world. In her words:

> Talking with a friend who looked at my early work and advised me to become more political was very valuable. She said, "Read stuff on political topics you are interested in so you have your finger on the pulse, and that can then be reflected in your work." I loved that and I have avidly read books by other activists with the deliberate idea that their words may influence me. She also told me to have an exhibition and I followed her advice and held my first one. Since then I have had many. I appreciated her direction and encouragement, and I have certainly embraced the political.

Using assemblage thinking to better understand the emergence of Asphyxia as an activist and artist in her home studio, attention turns to her body's capacity to act in response to the

specific context. In sum, Asphyxia's creative practice as political was enhanced in response to a combination of the material space of the home studio and the kin-aesthetics of frustration, the immaterial suggestion of an exhibition by a friend, alongside political discourses.

Advocating Mobility Justice

In this section, we offer insights into how Asphyxia's artwork contributes to mobility justice through how disability is felt, fashioned, and negotiated in public spaces. To do so, we offer a collaborative critical interpretation of two paintings Asphyxia contributed to the exhibition titled: *Sorry, the Lifestyle You Ordered Has Expired* and *The Frustrations of Horizontal Living*. These paintings are the creative product of art journalling that combined writings alongside learning to paint on an iPad. Asphyxia wrote that:

> I was very ill and had been unable to paint in my studio for some months. I tried painting in bed, thinking of Frida Kahlo, but I didn't even have the energy to do that. But I felt miserable because I have been so creative all my life and suddenly I couldn't do that anymore. My friend Hok suggested painting on the iPad.

In Asphyxia's case, the purpose of the iPad art journal was to cultivate and mediate her creative identity. The iPad was an unfamiliar exercise, and demanded learning new skills that was at first disheartening.

> I was not really satisfied with painting on the iPad because over many years of painting in real life I have developed specific techniques and textures I like to use. The brushes available in Procreate simply couldn't achieve the look I wanted for my artworks. They looked "fake" and "digital." I told Hok this and he rose to the challenge of trying to fix this. He made me brushes that could achieve my favourite techniques, sometimes scanned from pieces of my old artworks and sometimes by tinkering with the settings until he got something that looked realistic. Then I was armed with a set of brushes that could do just what I wanted, and so I dived in. I was soooooooo happy with this process. I started painting on the iPad every single day that I was well enough.

Haunted by a sense of iPad painting being "fake" and "digital," learning to paint on the iPad required an experimental process with her friend Hok. Together they developed, refined, and discarded brushes. For Asphyxia, art journalling was a technical training ground, alongside documenting everyday experiences exploring intersectionality. As Asphyxia went on to write, when a friend suggested the idea of an online public exhibition, this required conceptual engagement with feminism, and specifically intersectionality:

> I had a journal in my iPad and I was simply painting for my journal. Then a friend offered me the exhibition after she saw my work in my journal. Once that was locked in, I started deliberately painting more pieces to go in that exhibition. I wasn't so much focused on expression of disability as on social constructs for a theme, including feminist constructs. But a part of that

included my experience of disability since that is an intrinsic part of my everyday life.

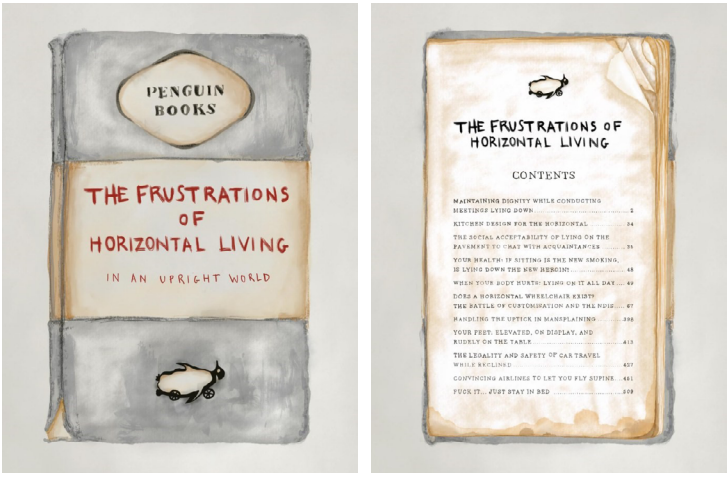

Fig. 3. Asphyxia. *The Frustrations of Horizontal Living.* 2021.

The Frustrations of Horizontal Living is an artwork in two pieces (fig. 3). The paintings were to politicise and open a dialogue about the mobility infrastructure challenges she experienced while bed-bound in a world designed for standing rather than prostrate bodies. As Asphyxia explained:

> For people in general, especially those not familiar with these experiences, I want to give them pause to stop and think. I want them to develop an understanding of their own privilege, and a realisation that there are hidden aspects to our experience beyond the obvious. For example, when I said to someone that I had such a different perspective of the world now that I live with OI (orthostatic intolerance—inability to tolerate being upright), she said, "Oh yes, you must really notice how dirty the floor is all the time." And I thought, "Gosh . . . that isn't even the start of it. In fact, that is so insignificant it doesn't even factor into my concerns!"'

Her paintings echo an all-too familiar experience of many people who use mobility devices when out in public (Waitt and Harada). Social norms in mobility infrastructure design privilege standing over seated bodily positions, ambulant over mobility assisted bodies.

Fig. 4. Asphyxia. *Sorry the Lifestyle You Ordered Has Expired.* 2021.

Asphyxia's painting *Sorry, the Lifestyle You Ordered Has Expired*, engages with the disability kin-aesthetics encountered in public spaces (fig. 4). Asphyxia's creative dialogue responds to how wheelchair technologies configure those reliant on wheelchair mobility as not only different but inferior.

> The primary concept I have in my head in the creation of my wheelchair is this: we look down on the "poor people" who need to use a wheelchair, and wheelchairs are not considered desirable. An able-bodied person would generally not sit in a wheelchair unless they *absolutely had to*. And there's a sense when I go out in public of people feeling sorry for me when I'm in it.

As assisted mobility technology, the wheelchair enables Asphyxia to flourish by accessing public place. Yet, echoing the work of Fritsch, for Asphyxia, the kin-aesthetics of wheelchair mobility generates a sense of becoming an object of pity for seemingly not being able to move through public space without technological assistance. Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism" is helpful to understand this felt double-bind of powered electric wheelchair mobility. The kin-aesthetics of powered wheelchair mobility simultaneously improved and threated her capacity to act, sense, and flourish. Her joyful experience of movement and accessibility was countered by ideas that produce disability through pity. Yet, as argued by Garland-Thompson, the heightened sensed moment of "misfitting" opens possibilities to rethink disability. In Asphyxia's words:

> But I want to completely reframe that narrative. I think of a wheelchair like a vehicle. People buy luxury cars not just for the practical mode of transport but because they are appealing or have status. People buy bikes for the same reason … Why not put a wheelchair into the same category? You have a luxury chair that saves the need to walk. I wanted to turn my chair into that. Something that people covet, because they're out and about and would quite like a good comfortable sit down. Why not see me as lucky because I am like the person zooming past in the luxury car while those with no means have to use up all their energy walking?

Asphyxia envisions a world where wheelchairs are seen as desirable and equal in status to luxury cars or bikes for people who can walk. Asphyxia imagines inclusive public spaces for luxury cars and wheelchairs, alongside considering how assistive technology design can influence people's perception of mobility aids.

> Of course, we have roads designed for those luxury cars, to make for easy passage, but we don't have the same ease of passage for wheelchairs. But if we built wheeled passageways the same way we have built roads, we could transform the wheelchair (as well as prams, strollers etc) into a luxury item for use by the able-bodied as well as disabled . . . But to make it work we'd need to fix the hideous design aesthetic of most disability equipment. They are not designed to be coveted. They are designed in the most minimal, unattractive, clinical/medical kind of way, for the most part, which really helps to keep people feeling sorry for us rather than coveting us. Under this vision, able-bodied people could use wheelchairs too, and we'd be embracing universal design.

Asphyxia explores how changing the appearance of assistive technology, such as wheelchairs, can shift the perception of mobility disability from medical to fashionable. At the same time, she sought to reposition disabled people in public narratives as 'rebellious activists' rather than "good" and "passive" all the time.

> The artwork about the wheelchair has tools for doing graffiti in the box on the back. I want to challenge a commonly held assumption that people with disabilities are considered to be "good" and "passive" rather than rebellious activists. … A lot of it is about making a statement and raising awareness—reframing the narrative and changing the assumptions/expectations people have about us.

Asphyxia writes that *Sorry, the Lifestyle You Ordered Has Expired* invites viewers to consider the power dynamics between transport modes, the experience of marginalisation of people with mobility aids, and to join conversations that shift disability narratives.

Conclusion

Creative practice and mobility is an emerging and rapidly developing research field (Barry et al.). The art of mobility enables insights into the reciprocal relationships between movement, self, and place. Through our collaboration with a queer, Deaf artist and activist, we contribute to how creative practice can mobilise an emotional politics that allows people

to reason in ways that are attuned to the kin-aesthetics of powered wheelchair mobility. We have illustrated how disabling sensations generated by everyday powered wheelchair journeys have the potential to enhance creative capacity to act in the pursuit of more enabling mobility infrastructure. Collaboration between disabled artists and non-disabled geographers can help address inequalities in mobility infrastructure for disabled individuals. This collaboration can enhance technological and engineering solutions by incorporating embodied knowledge and practical understanding of mobility infrastructure, documenting bodily sensations related to journeying, creating visibility around ableism, and generating new response-abilities. Future collaborative disability mobilities research can embrace an inter-disciplinary agenda. The potential of an inter-disciplinary agenda includes how (im)mobility can enrich understanding of creative practice alongside how creative practice can bring unique ways to understand, articulate, and transform movement and mobility politics.

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Competing Interests

The author(s) reported that no competing interests exist.

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