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Micro-activist Affordances

2019-03-18 10:46:16

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I met Ahmet, a disabled young man, during a visual ethnography I conducted in Istanbul, Turkey (2009), where I worked with people with disabilities related to rheumatoid arthritis – a chronic, painful disease, affecting the joints. During our interview, I ask Ahmet what type of toilets he prefers, knowing that in Turkey, toilets are typically squat and hardly ever accessible. To my surprise, he answers:

I mean it doesn't matter really, as long as the toilet is narrow. I mean if the walls are close enough so that I can hold onto them in case I lose my balance, or close enough so that I can hold onto them and take support. As long as the toilet space is not too wide, it is fine. Otherwise it doesn't matter if it is water closet or squat.

It is not the Western style seated WC that makes a toilet accessible for Ahmet, as I expected, but the proximity of its walls. It is their narrowness that gives him the support he needs to hold onto and balance – a very support that would, in an “accessible” toilet, be afforded by grab bars.



Figure 1. Accompanied by the researcher, Ahmet walks towards his home, leaning on the support of his crutch. All images by the author.

In the doing of any action, our properties complement the properties of the environment. This is what ecological psychologist James Gibson calls “affordances” (1979). What emerges in Ahmet’s affordance, however, is not just any other organism-environment complementarity. It is the *creation* of one where none exists. In the absence of an accessible toilet with grab bars, it is the tightness of space that complements Ahmet’s impaired joints, allowing him to lean on and take support from the walls as he kneels down and stands up. In fact, this newly created organism-environment reciprocity, I further argue, involves a kind of politics and a form of activism – one that is hardly ever recognized in disability studies. This is the very politics and vital activism that my work develops, at the crossovers of critical disability studies and performance studies. The crux of my intervention is: when existing affordances of the world leave no room for disabled people’s atypical bodies and minds, when the world becomes most unresponsive to the impairments, diseases and pains they live with, and when the world’s offerings become unreachable in states of deprivation and debilitation, disabled people may *make up* and at the same time *make up for* whatever affordances that are not readily provided with.

They invent, in short, what I call “micro-activist affordances.”

Originally proposed by Gibson, “affordances” refers to possibilities for action, the actualization of which is shaped by the reciprocity between the properties of the organism and those of the environment. With a critical disability theory of affordances, I ask: What happens when that reciprocity cannot readily be found in the given order of things, and thereafter? I have come to develop this theory over the course of the last ten years, by working with differently disabled people, all of whom I would call “affordance-makers,” in two ethnographies I conducted in Turkey and Quebec, and in doing an autoethnography of my own affordance-creations as a disabled person (Dokumaci 2013, 2017, forthcoming). This theory of micro-activist affordances is born from disability knowledge.

So, what might a micro-activist affordance be? Or first, how can we describe disability in terms of affordances?

Defining disability ecologically

Ecologically, we can think of disability as a narrowing of the environment and its existing set of affordances in response to non-conventional or non-normative bodies and minds. Given what disability rights movements and the social model have taught us, this would not be a revelation. Yes, the built/social environment *disables*. But here is the part that the social model leaves out, and that my ecological definition takes into account: chronic pain, disease and debility are also experienced as a narrowing of

the environment and its available affordances. Pain, as described by Scarry (1985), is the only bodily event without a world-counterpart (161). In fact, we can think of chronic pain as the negation of affordances. Similarly, it is “world-as-opportunity” – or the world-as-affordances I would say – that disease, as suggested by its etymology, calls into question (Leder 1990, 81). States of living that do not (originally) involve any impairment can slip into the vicinity of disability as war, structural inequalities, and violence continue to make basic sustenance unavailable and “maim” (Puar 2017) the very infrastructures needed to sustain life. Neither the presence of impairment (as the medical model would have it) nor the barriers of a disabling society (as the social model would counter) would suffice to understand what runs through these disparate experiences. But if we think of disability in terms of affordances, as I propose to do, then we have a vocabulary to articulate what could possibly reverberate through the localities of disability in the Global South and North. My ecological definition of disability goes as follows: disability, in all of its variegated manifestations, is experienced as the contraction of the environment and its existing set of affordances, regardless of the cause of the contraction.[\[1\]](#) To experience disability is to experience the slipping of the world’s available affordances from one’s grasp.

Imaginary space of performance opens up

By “contraction” or “narrowing down,” I certainly do not mean to invoke a deficit approach. Instead my theory of micro-activist affordances can be read as a response to Kafer’s yearning for “stories that not only admit limitation, frustration, even failure, but that recognize such failure as ground for theory itself” (2013, 141). Because in calling attention to such moments of shrinking and constraints, I seek to foreground precisely what happens afterwards. When the environment fails to afford a readily available world-counterpart to our non-standard, painful, sick and debilitated bodies, I claim that it is the improvisatory space of performance that opens up and lets us make the very same environment afford otherwise and slantwise. This is how I build a new theory of affordances based on disability and performance. Performance, in the way I define it, is what allows us to imagine the very same recalcitrant materiality for something other than what it currently is and what it readily affords. Upon facing the limits of what the environment presently offers, disabled people may begin moving, sensing, behaving (or literally making up things) in such impromptu ways that they get to invent affordances that would have otherwise been unimaginable. It is through the imaginary condition of performance that disabled people move beyond the environment “as is,” and relate to its surfaces and substances “as if” they were something else. As does Ahmet by way of leaning onto and taking support from the walls of a narrow toilet, imagining (as he does so) the very affordance of grab bars in their absence. As does another interlocutor by way of bending

her head, bringing her arm towards her bent head and pulling her hair down, actualizing (as she does so) the affordance of an elongated comb that would have saved her impaired shoulders from being moved (figure 2). As do I by biting the caps of bottles that are to be twisted off. As does Cindy by “engineering with unlikely things” (Hendren and Lynch 2016). As does Zebreda by devising all sorts of affordances in *affordable* ways.^[2] As does a disabled father who, living in a resource-deprived Syrian refugee camp in Turkey, invents a prosthesis out of tuna cans, which allows his disabled daughter to move around the dusty grounds of the camp.^[3]

To be clear, when disabled people move their bodies and belongings in the particular ways they do, they do not perform “just another body technique.” Instead, they bring into being what is otherwise an inherently absent world-counterpart (or rather what is absent as a counterpart in already materialized affordances). I claim this because neither Ahmet had access to a toilet with grab bars, nor the Syrian father to a prosthesis. Neither did my interlocutor (figure 2) own or even know of the adapted tool next to her image. And yet they were able to imagine the affordances of such “assistive” tools, devices and accessible places in and through their movements and impromptu creations. It is exactly to these ingenious choreographies, creative hacks and workarounds, with which disabled people make the environment afford action possibilities that it did not initially seem to afford, that I refer to as micro-activist affordances. I define micro-activist affordances as micro, unfinished, ephemeral acts of world-building, with which disabled people literally *make up*, and at the same time *make up for*, whatever affordance that fails to readily materialize in their environments. Micro-activist affordances are ways of occupying niches “that are *yet to be occupied*” (Gibson 1979, 128), especially when existing niches of the world fail our sick, impaired, maimed and non-fitting bodies and minds persistently and pervasively.



Figure 1. ‘On Falling III,’ Arseli Dokumaci, *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis

Ltd, www.tandfonline.com. On the left-hand side is an image of a woman combing her hair with her micro-activist affordance. On the other side is an image of an elongated comb that represents the materialized form of her very affordance (Dokumaci 2013, 401).

Why *the need* for a critical disability theory of affordances?

No doubt we all do things differently. Further this difference is always already embedded in the notion of affordances (making the proposal of a new theory sound perhaps redundant). But I feel *the need* to go beyond Gibson's theory (and its existing interpretations) because to come up with affordances where none exists in actuality, to make up for what one is not provided with conveniently, to carve out a livable niche in an inherently inhospitable world is nothing trivial is, in fact, a 24/7 labor and *an act of activism* that needs to be acknowledged, articulated and theorized. Hence my proposal for a theory of micro-activist affordances. Micro-activist affordances is, simultaneously, a call to rethink what counts as disability activism, who gets to practice it, and under which conditions.

Of course, we cannot understand what could possibly be "activist" about these affordances if we limit our understanding of activism to fight for civil rights, freedom from barriers, and to intentional and explicit acts targeting public space. But if we think of activism as bringing new ways of being into life, then these affordances very much so count as activism. Micro-activist affordances, in the way I define them, are humble acts of world-building that occur within the most micro of moments and the most ordinary of actions, perhaps without any explicit intention of "changing the world" or an audience present to acknowledge such fortitude. Micro-activist affordances bring what Friedner and Cohen term "inhabitable worlds" (2015) into life albeit within the transience of performance and without a solid claim on what those worlds should be or look like. In fact, we can think of micro-activist affordances as the imagining of, what some scholars call, "accessible futures," and actualizing these imagined futures within the very act of doing; within the ephemerality of performance where things can always be imagined otherwise. When a micro-activist affordance emerges, it is "as if" an accessible future already existed in *the here and now* of performance, as "a future in the present" (Muñoz 2009, 49), and we are yet to recognize and inhabit these futures. Micro-activist affordances are how we bring accessible futures into being regardless of geography and what makes us disabled (ableism, barriers, illness, pain, debilitation).

Notes

[1] Maarten van Westen (2018) discusses how the specificities of

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (and dementia) result in the “shrinking life-worlds” of patients as the affordances around them become less relevant. In my ecological definition of disability, however, I propose that it is *disability* that is experienced as the narrowing down of the environment, and its already utilized affordances, and that this narrowing down is *not* specific to a disease category; but is, in fact, a general condition of the experiencing of disability regardless of its causation.

[2] See “Zebreda Makes it work!” <http://www.zebredamakesitwork.com>

[3] See Al Jazeera News. 2018. *Syrian girl who used tuna cans for legs receives prosthetic limbs*.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/syrian-girl-tuna-cans-legs-receives-prosthetic-limbs-180707083338874.html>

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AMA citation

Dokumaci A. *Micro-activist Affordances*. *Somatosphere*. 2019. Available at: <http://somatosphere.net/2019/03/micro-activist-affordances.html>. Accessed March 18, 2019.

APA citation

Dokumaci, Arseli. (2019). *Micro-activist Affordances*. Retrieved March 18, 2019, from Somatosphere Web site: <http://somatosphere.net/2019/03/micro-activist-affordances.html>

Chicago citation

Dokumaci, Arseli. 2019. *Micro-activist Affordances*. Somatosphere. <http://somatosphere.net/2019/03/micro-activist-affordances.html> (accessed March 18, 2019).

Harvard citation

Dokumaci, A 2019, *Micro-activist Affordances*, Somatosphere. Retrieved March 18, 2019, from <<http://somatosphere.net/2019/03/micro-activist-affordances.html>>

MLA citation

Dokumaci, Arseli. "Micro-activist Affordances." 18 Mar. 2019.

Somatosphere. Accessed 18 Mar.

2019.<<http://somatosphere.net/2019/03/micro-activist-affordances.html>>