

18

ONLINE INTIMACIES AND ARTFUL LIFE IN TURTLE DISCO ZOOMSHELLS

Petra Kupperts

Turtle Disco is a disability-led and queer-led project space, set up in the living room of a home that my wife, poet and dancer Stephanie Heit, and I share in the small rustbelt city of Ypsilanti, Michigan, on Anishinaabe Territory. We are two white cis queer disabled women. She has significant experiences with the mental health system, electroshocks, and resulting brain injuries, and I live with pain and use a scooter or wheelchair. We set up Turtle Disco in 2017 as an alternative to the wider art project series I've been leading since the mid-nineties, *The Olimpias*, a loose, friendship-based network of international disabled artists coming together for workshops and participatory performances, usually in non-arts-identified public sites.

This chapter focuses on *Turtle Disco Zoomshell* offerings, a disability-led initiative that creates invitation for conversations around intimacy and support webs for disabled artists. The Zoomshell was our answer to the pressures of pandemic art/life in 2020–2021, particularly for the often fragile and fragmented scene of disability culture art makers.

One inspiration for Turtle Disco's local format was Donna Haraway's Chapter 8 in *Staying with the Trouble*, a chapter born out of a creative writing collaboration, where she and her collaborators envision life after the apocalypse. Small numbers of people come together to live in the ruins and find new ways forward, hopeful, solar-punk style.

We gave one of our first presentations about our aesthetics and ethics at the 2017 Allied Media Conference, an important site for change-makers in Detroit. A book by one of the Allied Media organizers, adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy*, also helped us envision contemporary approaches for our work, with biomimicry imagery that allowed us to think of turtles, hives, and the sleeping nests of deer as ways of figuring activism that are capacious, critical, and kind

to us and others. Other ongoing influences on our work are Mia Mingus's work on access intimacy (2017), and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's modeling of care webs (*Care Work*, 2018).

Our original Turtle Disco event took place at the first Ypsilanti Pride Festival, a small community-based event that didn't yet have sponsors or much business presence. Small local organizations, like ourselves, were able to set up a booth for free. We put up a table and a bunch of comfy camping chairs, offered an urn of tea, and called it the QueerCrip Pussy Poets' Rest Stop, since we had marched as the "QueerCrip Pussy Poets" at the Traverse City Women's March earlier that year. Our rest stop felt magical—we offered people a place to chill down from the Pride energy, and we invited them to select poetry by queer authors. When we saw someone reading a book by a friend, we asked them if we might take their picture, to send to the author. While some refused, most said yes. We heard moving stories about not being out in small town Michigan, about the importance of having a Pride Day, and about parents and chosen family.

From this initial event, we launched writing and movement sessions in Turtle Disco itself, including Queer Dreaming, a trance/writing series that began on the anniversary of the Pulse tragedy.

People came to us by foot, with bicycles, by bus and by car, and we sat together and wrote, or moved in the studio, and dreamed up new friendship patterns together. "Product" was never the focus of our work: while we incorporated free-writes into most of our sessions, we rarely share finished work (outside designated salons), as we see our offerings as processes, as laboratories.

A few years later, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Stephanie and I thought about how we could support our disability culture community to thrive through available technologies. We began hosting a number of weekly disability-led events online, including our Kaffeeklatsch Zoomshell (a mash-up of the German word for sitting around with coffee and cake, and a turtle-appropriate making-do with Zoom), the Crip Magic Zoomshell, Amoeba Dances, and more. Our publicity strategies for these events are mainly word-of-mouth, combined with semi-regular emails with event details. The happenings are consciously small, and we try to keep the overall number of people in each session to below twelve.

How queer disabled people come together has always been complex: bio families are so often central to socializing for people who cannot easily get out of the home. But queerness has often been disavowed by bio families, and the kind of alternative kinship and relationship structures that queer life offers have often been out of reach to disabled queer people. The COVID-19 pandemic has both curtailed *and* opened up new avenues of togetherness for many of us. Turtle Disco's Zoomshells were our offering to our network of disabled queer people (and others) to find new ways forward toward sociability, connection, creativity, and online intimacy.

Our main tool for the Turtle Disco Zoomshells was Zoom: the long-around video conferencing tool that suddenly jumped into everybody's living room in March 2020. At the beginning, we tried a range of different conference media, but we quickly settled on Zoom as the most stable and accessible option at the time. As a disability-focused group, we immediately had to deal with the problems and opportunities of the platform: how about access? Who can use the chat-function, how do we get audio transcription, how do we pin the ASL interpreter?

Zoom and the wider disability culture world learned together—and suddenly disabled rhetoricians and digital specialists who had long used video conferencing and other multimodal tech engagements were at the forefront of technical development. (Figure 18.1).

Our main challenge was to create intimacy options in online engagements. Pretty soon, we all had Zoom head: overload, with too much staring at screens.

In Chapter 15, Dalida María Benfield et al., discuss access in their collaborative VR project.



FIGURE 18.1 *Turtle Disco Zoom Shell Kaffeeklatsch*, 2 February 2021. Screenshot courtesy of the author.

Conversations were really awkward since pausing and turn-taking is so complicated in the rhythm of Zoom worlds. So, we developed a script for our Kaffeeklatsch. It includes giving explicit permission to not look at the screen, to be comfortable, disability-culture style, to not reproduce the social norms of normative worlds if we do not want to.

We have a first round when we all check in, give our names, pronouns, and locations, including Indigenous territories. If someone is not sure about whose territory encompasses their location, we offer helpful advice on how to find out about Indigenous life around them, rather than saying, “never mind,” and moving on. The slight discomfort of waiting and learning together is worth it, as the notion of “unsettling” is central to the ethic and aesthetic here.

In a second, much longer round, everybody gets time to check in as an artist and/or creative being: How are you, what are you working on, what moves you? The turns are clear now, people know when they can go, and many quickly dive deep, sharing what really is going on, and how it affects their creative lives. Of course, many people’s regular art forms were not available during pandemic times, in particular dance and theater options. As a disability culture space, we quickly expanded definitions of creative practice to include modalities such as cooking or gardening. Beautiful moments happened when we used our artful focus to look at what might be considered non-art activities. For example, one person spoke about cleaning the house and returning a space through this activity to its own rhythm.

At the end of a Kaffeeklatsch, if there is time, we discuss an issue that emerged from the round. Topics have included how we use artist communities, how we present our disabilities to the wider world, how we develop ourselves as artists, and so on. Some of these themes also push into other aspects of our Zoomshell Offerings, such as our Salon, where people book a slot to present their artwork to the community (and this is the only space in Turtle Disco where people share completed or in-progress work).

The ritualistic structure of the Kaffeeklatsch helped ground it and created a structure of safety and predictability in a destabilized and vanishing social world. We knew that for some people, in particular people with immune differences, our weekly check-ins were part of a very slim pipeline to a social life.

Our other digital offerings include Contemplative Dance and Writing Practice, led by Stephanie Heit, based on Barbara Dilley’s Contemplative Movement structure; my own Amoeba Dancing, a form influenced by Emilie Conrad Da’oud’s Continuum Movement; Pauline Oliveros’s Deep Listening; and Martín Ramírez’s visual artwork. We also run Crip Magic Reading/Writing sessions where we read published disabled (or disability-adjacent) writers’ poems, discuss them, and then write from prompts Stephanie and I develop from the week’s poems. Recent poets whose work we have discussed include danez smith, Roxanna Bennett, Bob Kaufman, Evelyn Lau, Maura Alia Badji, Owólabi Aboyade, and Shira Erlichman.

Creative writing is a part of many of these engagements, and I want to offer some glimpses of what our collaborators in the Zoomshell have written. The

full poems, texts, and images are included in a Turtle Disco Pandemic Artifacts chapbook: an archive of mainly disabled, mainly queer expressions of creative life.

On our website, the material is available as a pdf—one of the few outward-directed audience offerings from our pandemic labor.¹

Filipino-Canadian performance artist Jose Miguel Esteban wrote the following poem, after a session of Amoeba Dancing. We let sounds like sustained hums drop through our bodies, let the echoes hollow out tunnels, and listen imaginatively into the three-dimensional thick texture of ourselves. Esteban writes:

Desire to enter the cavity within,
drop into the world of the body.
A hollow space.
A hallowed place.
Linger.
The wind whistles,
escapes the clenching of teeth.
Collapse the tunnel
and hold the breath.²

In his writing, I so appreciate the opening into another world, into hallowed space, and the glimpses of outside worlds, of wind, as a fantastical jump out of the rectangular imagination of Zoom squares.

Kansas-based writer Hannah Soyer wrote this as a remnant of a Crip Magic session where we focused on thresholds:

Dream space/threshold space

Threshold space, layered in blankets and alternating cushions of heat and chill. Last night, a taste I can't quite get out of my mouth—a hallway of miniature houses, conjoined together, purple exteriors with white front doors. At the end of the hallway, a room behind a door—this is shared space, I'm told. There is a bookshelf with multicolored books, a kitchen, and, mysteriously, a cat. The room is empty, but I know instinctively that it was once occupied by a dead friend, and I know, also instinctively, that the sacredness of this space is that I can commune with those passed on.³

She goes on to describe ghostly presences, the sharpness of grief and mourning, held in the specificity of Zoom worlds here and there, in one's own site and in the glimpsed spaces of intimate resting places of others. She ends her writing:

In some instances, the breaking of a barrier allows certain, lifesaving substances to get through. Cellular growth in plants begs for breakdown—one cell bursting open to create more, it is a life in death situation. . . . Meandering, we find

meaning through association—there is no narrative, *no narrative*, to lying heavy on a bed, to numbing out from grief to boundaries transgressed.⁴

The presence of boundaries, the loneliness of lying-in beds: these are experiences narrated in so many COVID-19 witness accounts, but they are also long part of the aesthetics of disability writing with its emphasis on embodiment, on the effects of pain on narratives, and on crip time: time other-wise, out of sync-time. Hannah coalesces these experiences into a new pattern, one that speaks to me of the Zoom world, too, of the tenuousness of cells with their double meanings of life and imprisonment.

Another Canadian contributor, poet Roxanna Bennett, begins a poem that emerged out of *Contemplative Dance and Writing* with images of spiders, assembling images from a Turtle Disco improvisation: the kind of glimpses of bodies we offer each other as we use the cinematography of the computer camera to engage in mutually influenced movements—for instance, by mirroring one another:

reserve a quilt of spiders

storing energies like chipmunks
 in a dream hut dark with licorice & garlic
 what do I need & is there enough
 rest is/in love mirror hands dancing
 from Madrid to Michigan many limbed
 orange many fingered what do the trees need
 from us head rocks voluptuous
 soft rocking waves warm wood far away
 open space music in small not-squares
 quilt of spiders purple arthritis gloves
 spellsign love access is meet in kindness
 with a magic wand⁵

In the session Roxanna describes, we are indeed from all over the world, from Madrid, Michigan, Scotland, Washington State, New York City, Chicago, and beyond. Disability dances across the words in so many traces: the way we aim for access with kindness, when we audio describe what we are doing with our hands for one another. And again, the trees outside feed into our experience, as did the wind earlier: we pay attention to the materials in our spaces, looking for what we can share with one another via the screen. We hold computers up to the window to see our different worlds, smell alien scents, and hear the call of forbidden spaces beyond closed borders. We unsettle ourselves, imagine ourselves in wider and nonhuman webs.

These three short fragments offer an insight into the aesthetics of our Zoomshell: the engagement of embodiment and site with technological mediation, held within a framework of access desires. We all aim for prägnantz, the closure and roundedness

of experience: all these fragments reach out, either into oneself, or out into the world, engaging ghostly others, one's past, one's interior, one's co-players on the screen. We collaboratively and individually shape satisfaction through contact.

As I am writing this, the pandemic is still raging in many parts of the world. COVID-19 might have reshaped social contact for a long time—we just do not know yet. But the video-mediated intimacies of our Zoomshells will stay with us and will become part of our aesthetic access repertoire beyond the exigencies of the pandemic itself. These intimacy training grounds allow us to be in contact and communion with people far beyond our physical Turtle Disco.

Participation Prompt

Online Intimacies and Artful Nests

Build nests in your home space, something that you are happy to share via a Zoom screen. What is in the nest, how have you feathered it, upholstered it? Do you lie in it, or sit? What are the smells that surround you, what textures meet your skin? What did you bring into the intimate space you have created? What are the stories of the objects?

Now take each other on a tour of your nests and tell each other a part of your stories.

Notes

1. *Pandemic Artifacts from the Zoomshell*. A Turtle Disco Disability Culture Production. Edited by Stephanie Heit and Petra Koppers. Ypsilanti, MI: Turtle Disco Press, 2021. <https://stephanieheitpoetry.files.wordpress.com/2021/08/turtle-disco-pandemic-artifacts-from-the-zoomshell.pdf>
2. Jose Miguel Esteban, 2021.
3. Hannah Soyer, 2021.
4. Hannah Soyer, 2021.
5. Roxanna Bennett, 2021.

Bibliography

Mingus, Mia. *Access Intimacy, Interdependence and Disability Justice*. Paul K. Longmore Lecture on Disability Studies at San Francisco State University delivered on 11 April 2017. <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/access-intimacy-interdependence-and-disability-justice/>.

Pandemic Artifacts from the Zoomshell. A Turtle Disco Disability Culture Production. Edited by Stephanie Heit and Petra Koppers. Ypsilanti, MI: Turtle Disco Press, 2021. <https://stephanieheitpoetry.files.wordpress.com/2021/08/turtle-disco-pandemic-artifacts-from-the-zoomshell.pdf>

Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*. Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp, 2018.