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ALONG DISABLED LINES

Claiming spatial agency through installation art

Amanda Cachia (2016)

This essay explores how contemporary artists, Wendy Jacob (http://wendyjacob.net) and Corban Walker (www.corbanwalker.com), configure a new disabled geometry of space through their site-specific art installations that examine experiences of autism and dwarfism, where the ubiquitous line is the primary mode of engagement. The artists capture how disabled bodies uniquely move through space in order to claim spatial agency over public environments that commonly serve "normative" audiences and art works. Specifically, through the design of custom-made installations and objects, they call into question how to look, and offer the viewer the opportunity to re-think the traditional and ostensibly normative way their own embodiments move through a three-dimensional installation in a gallery or public space. By discussing Wendy Jacob's *Between Spaces* tightrope performances (2007), her collaboration with an autistic boy in *Explorers Club* (2009), and Corban Walker's *Trapezoid* installation (1997), I will suggest that their works offer experiences that shed light on complex embodiment in a bid to politically re-orient the viewer's perceptions of disabled subjectivity that is rarely addressed in contemporary art theory and praxis. Additionally, offering alternative accounts of spatiality through the phenomenology of the disabled body offers new perspectives on architecture itself: on its simultaneous limits and possibilities, and how it might be disrupted and transformed to account for a wider variety of body types and movements. Through the contemporary work discussed in this paper, architecture is re-imagined and re-built.

Following this, I am interested in how audiences might become more aware of what Tobin Siebers calls "disability aesthetics" (2006, this volume). He defines disability aesthetics as a complex embodiment, where the atypical body is marked by nuance rather than deficiency or deviancy. If installation itself, then, is characterized by a viewer's embodied experience with the art and the spaces it creates, how can complex embodiment add new layers to this framework, especially where disabled viewers and/or artists' bodies bring this explicitly to our notice? If installation art has always challenged the so-called normative embodied experience through work that helps us to see in new ways, how

might it also offer perceptions of disabled corporeality that add rich new layers to this lineage? Ultimately, I will suggest that the disability aesthetics – and geography – that Jacob and Walker lay out is one that sets an important new agenda within contemporary art practices and architectures, where their unique user perspectives of space should be applied to, as Aimi Hamraie puts it, "a theory of body-environment relations focused on social justice" (2013, see this volume).

Disability, geography and spatial agency

According to geographer B. J. Gleeson, "disability is a profoundly socio-spatial issue" (1996: 388). Apart from being rooted in the ableism of the medical and social models, disability oppression is also connected to the material forces of architecture and the design and geography of urban space, because disabled people inhabit space that is distorted. By this, Gleeson means that the "physical environment is structured in ways that exacerbate the distorting effect of disability, through careless design and signage, for example, which inhibit the access and mobility of disabled people" (1996: 389). Disabled people must therefore inhabit and endure distorted space, which is the social space of the ostensibly "normal" person. But what would happen if the disabled subject were to create their own idealized, yet practical space to "fit" their complex embodiment, thereby transforming the generally inaccessible geographic landscape in their everyday lives?

Theorist Elizabeth Grosz asks if architecture can construct a better future for our citizens, and suggests that while architects must keep social and political problems in mind, it is better if they dwell on exploration and invention, as architecture is a key mode of experimental practice. She says, "architecture is a set of highly provisional 'solutions' to the question of how to live and inhabit space with others" (2001: 148). If there is an acknowledgement of multiple bodies and complex embodiment, then architecture needs to experiment with how this might become manifest through design. What can we learn about this through exploring art installation inside the normative space of the white cube of an art gallery, or a public art installation outside the walls of a gallery or a museum? Can artists "disable" normative space by obstructing or offering new modes of mobility or other multi-modal, architectural sensations?

In *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture* (2011) Awan, Schneider and Till offer numerous art installation projects where contemporary artists are challenging normative models of how urban space is designed. Referencing Henri Lefebvre's 1974 book, *The Production of Space*, they suggest that social space must draw on the contribution of others, rather than relying on a fixed template of expert authorship. Social space is dynamic and evolving, where multiple actors can contribute to its progress at different stages. Social space is also not neutral, and indeed, nor is the gallery. Instead, it is political, and so charged with the binaries of power/empowerment, interaction/isolation, control/freedom and more. As the authors of *Spatial Agency* note, "…every line on an architectural drawing should be sensed as the anticipation of a future social relationship, and not merely as a harbinger of aesthetics or as an instruction to a contractor" (2011: 30). How, then, can transformation be achieved with lines beyond those that are drawn on architectural plans? Engaging with how Jacob and Walker use line offers one way of thinking and designing differently.

Aswan et al. suggest that it is through the concept of spatial agency that artists and architects might find opportunity to contribute new thinking around oppressive or marginalizing spaces, and in ways that need to be articulated in a broader spatial field, beyond artwork or building as product. I will suggest that Jacob and Walker enact this very spatial agency for the benefit of disabled subjectivity through their practices. While it is true that altering the embedded socio-spatial dynamics in the environment or in the gallery will not necessarily lift all that oppresses disabled people at large, it is a beginning in order to think about how spatial agency may contribute to challenging the "normative" user experience of contemporary art and even architecture. Spatial agency as it applies to disability will insist on a type of mapping of disabled corporeality, tracing the complex embodiment of multiple disabled experiences, ranging from autism to dwarfism. How do the bodies of an autistic child or a man with dwarfism push back against spaces that are prohibitive to them, or inaccessible? The body–environment interactions of Jacob's project with an autistic boy, and Walker's engagement with scale and architecture in his combat against the "staturization" of space ("the dominant preference for able bodies of an average height" (Kruse 2010: 184)) both speak to how these engagements can be political sites and contribute to the lexicon of spatial agency, and revised spatial identities. I'd like to explore how the flesh of the complex body in conversation with architecture, the environment and its spatial elements and qualities can also contribute to knowledge production in art theory and praxis, and perhaps more broadly in terms of lived architectural space (Seamon 2010).

Disembodying the gallery: applying the Corban rule

Contemporary Irish artist Corban Walker's work often relates to architectural scale and spatial perception, utilizing industrial materials such as steel, aluminum and glass, drawing on minimalism to highlight different perspectives in relation to height and scale. Walker has anchondroplasia, the most common type of dwarfism. He is four feet tall and creates his sculpture stacks in direct proportion to his body using the "Corban rule," a precise mathematical calculation he devised, wherein he uses his own height as measure of his art. This spurs viewers to think about the built environment in different terms. Walker has talked about how he tries to get viewers to bend, crouch, twist or turn as they encounter his works from new positions. For example, in his *Trapezoid* installation (Figure 21.1) the viewer sees several rows of stainless steel wire lines strung from one side of a gallery wall to the other, suspended approximately four feet above the ground. Then upon walking to another section of the gallery, the lines begin again, and repeat themselves, threading from one side of the room to the next, using the standard dimension of four feet as an elevation point from the ground, reaching up to the lowest row of the steel lines. Walker is using his height as a measuring point for the elevation of the lines, so that he is disrupting the average-height viewer's spatial flow as they walk through a gallery space.

Walker thus provides a point of view that refuses the typical, normal or average. Bending down to see the installation shifts "standard-sized" audiences from their usual, unthought about looking straight-on viewpoint of an artwork. Walker wants to focus on drawing people downwards, closer to the ground, into a dimension equivalent to the "Corban scale." As Walker is four feet tall, he usually has to crane his neck to look up at people's

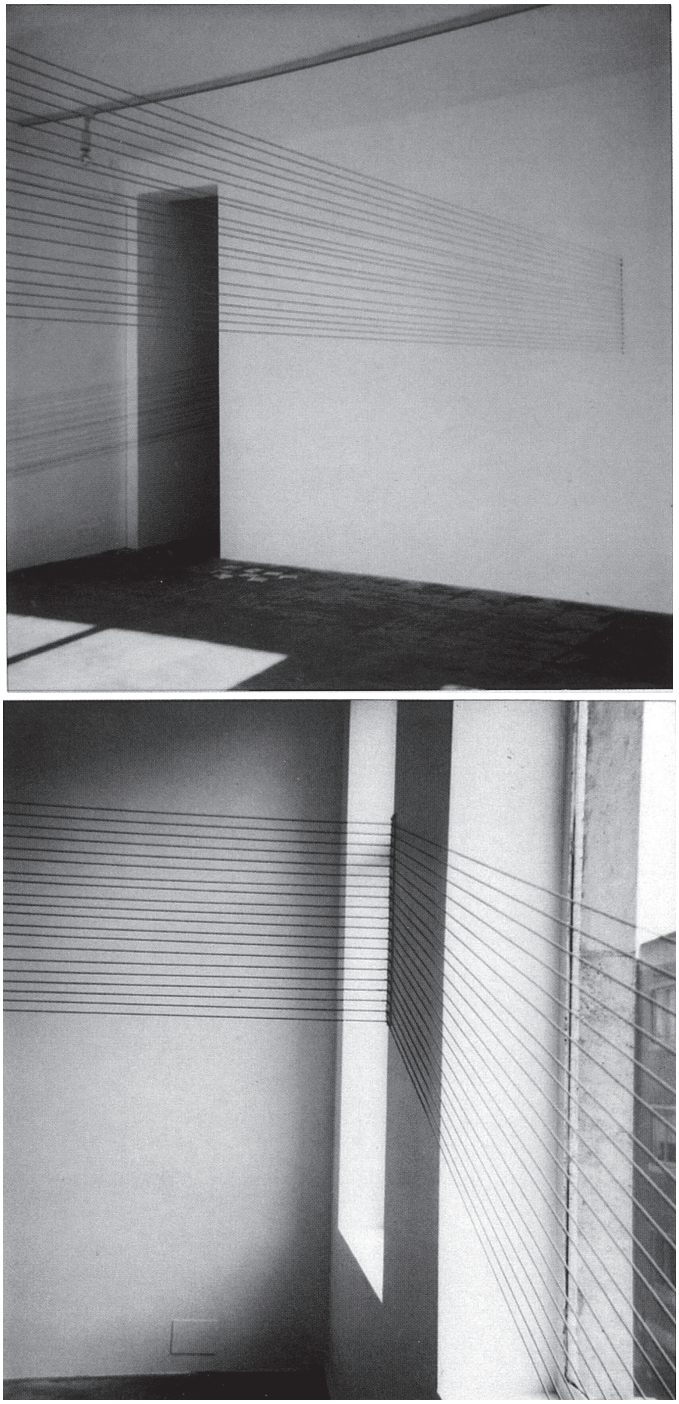

FIGURE 21.1 Corban Walker (1997) *Trapezoid*, Ridinghouse Editions, London, March 6th – April 19th (catalogue). Photos courtesy of the artist.

faces or reach up to shake someone's hand in his everyday reality. *Trapezoid* reverses this "staturization of space" (Kruse 2010: 184). As the name implies, the artist is hoping to ensnare the visitor into this throng of lines, disrupting their smooth path so that they are forced to consider an alternative perspective in viewing space at a different scale – a re-staturization through spatial disorientation for average-height visitors.

Walker disembodies the gallery frame through this disruption in space by the effective use of lines, therein claiming an alternative spatial agency in a domain that usually privileges the average-height viewing position, where paintings are hung at a so-called universal and standard eye-level. Walker's work critically intersects with many conventions in art history and exhibition curation, such as Rudolf Arnheim's belief that "the viewer creates a decisive center," and thus that average height is the idealized viewing position that affects everything around him or her (1982: 16). But how and what is seen by a viewer depends on their spatial position and their orientation towards an art object or event. For Arnheim when paintings or objects are seen head-on within the vertical dimension, they are seen well because they are viewed at a comfortable distance. He says this comfort is disrupted when works of art are engaged along the horizontal plane, because "this is the dimension of most of our actions in space" (1982: 13). If our feet "get in the way of our eyes," it will cause a strange optical situation, because:

> the eyes are meant to look forward, to scan the environment in search of whatever shows up vertically as friend or foe. For the eyes to look down, the head or body has to bend, and even then the object underfoot cannot be viewed perpendicularly. It will be seen at an angle and therefore distorted, and that angle changes continuously as the person, engaged in his business, moves across the floor. The viewer's eyes are too close to encompass and analyze any extended horizontal pattern as a whole. Different portions present themselves in the visual field as the viewer changes position.
>
> (1982: 116)

Indeed, Arnheim's discussion fits squarely within the realm of visual and optical sensations experienced by the dwarf, who is positioned at an alternative height from the average-height person and gazes upon different portions of the visual field in comparison to others. Arnheim here also perfectly (and unintentionally) describes Walker's strategy and therefore his spatial agency in *Trapezoid*: for Walker is already aware of the spatial disorientation that ensues when one is forced to look downward, bend, crouch or twist in order to look upon a fixed object or move without visual or physical obstruction. By forcing his "normal" viewers to encounter some discomfort, or at least, temporary distortion, asks them to take notice of the daily realities of disabled people's geographies.

Through the lines of string or stainless steel, the ideal of the framed painting is also negated as there are now additional conceptual and multi-modal layers to consider. The viewer is forced to reflect on the physical context and "their own participation in the production or experience of any meaning in the encounter with art objects" (1982: 116). This is the axis in which the work of Walker spins, as his work provides embodied encounters to the public that act to reveal the artificial construction of conventional gallery spaces and "normal" viewing experiences. Here the aesthetics of disability renders

alternative meanings that make explicit and expressive the often hidden inter-relationships between body size, art object and movements through space. The Corban rule adds a fascinating and evocative intervention and juxtaposition with other human scale devices, such as Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* (1487) and Le Corbusier's *Modulor* (1943). The *Modulor*, in particular, is an anthropometric scale of proportions devised by the Swiss-born French architect. It is based on the six-foot height of an English man with his arm raised. These measurements do not represent the diversity, form, and shape of all bodies, and these measurements translated into architecture and our built environment create barriers for disabled people. These art historical aesthetic ideals of perfection, proportion, and beauty are found in classical and modernist art, and in architecture through concepts such as the Golden Section. This is "an average measure conforming to man" (Wolfflin 1994: 169). Michael Davidson has talked about how for eighteenth century German art historians and writers Gottfried Lessing and Johann Winckelmann, "a realistic depiction of a 'misshapen man' is less important for its verisimilitude than for its demonstration of

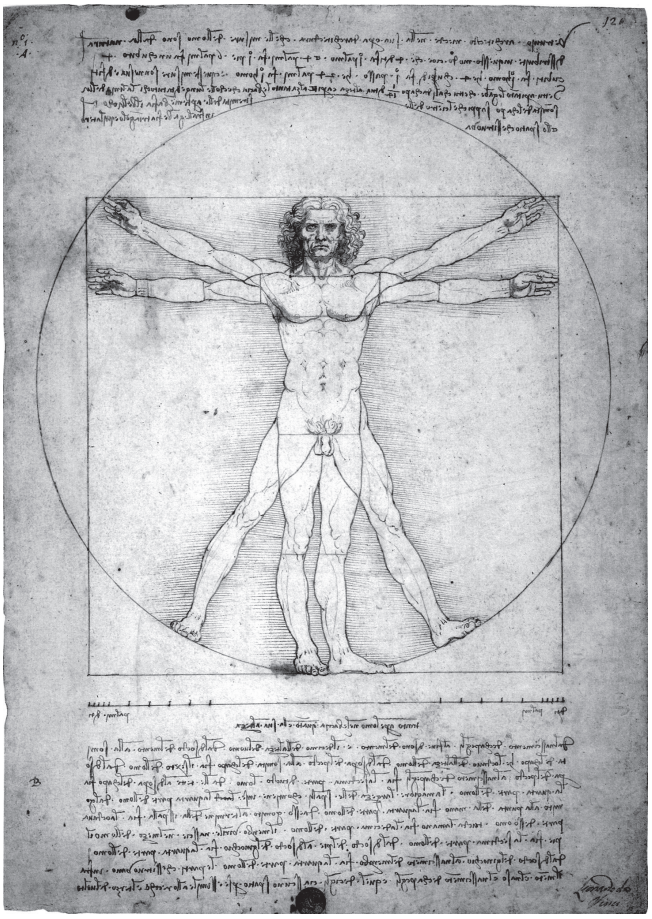

FIGURE 21.2 Leonardo da Vinci, *Vitruvian Man*, c. 1487, pen and ink with wash over metal point on paper. Collection of Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice.

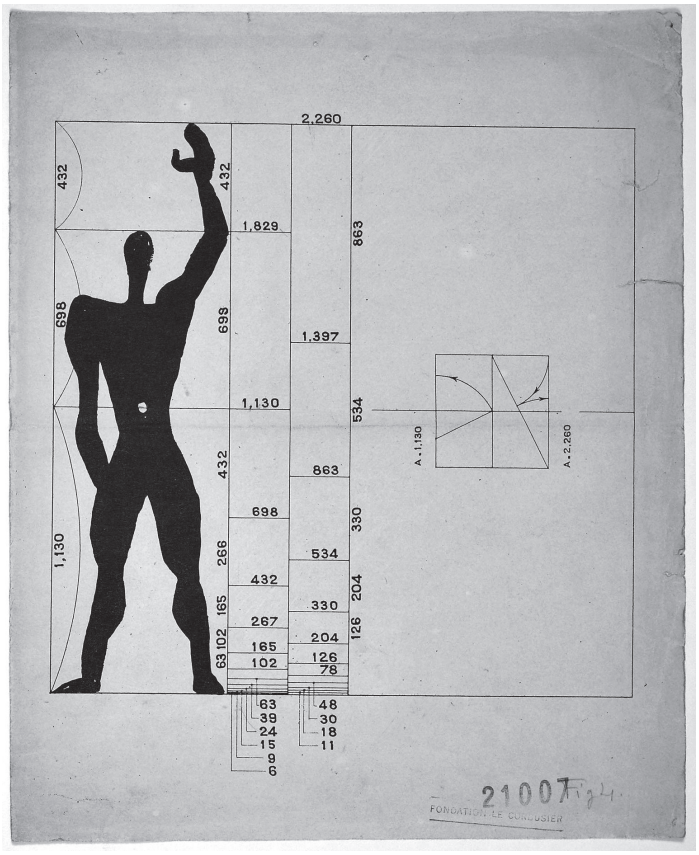

FIGURE 21.3 *Le Corbusier* (Charles-Edouard Jeanneret,1887–1965) © ARS,NY. Le Modulor. 1945. Drawing. Photo Credit: Banque d'Images, ADAGP / Art Resource, New York'

artisanal superiority. What is clear …is that the ability of aesthetics to define affective and sensory response depends on – indeed, is constituted by – bodily difference" (Davidson 2015: 26). Regretfully, the widespread representation of a bodily ideal in *Vitruvian Man* (Figure 21.2) and the *Modulor* (Figure 21.3) in art history and architecture contributes to ableist attitudes and discrimination against the disabled minority. This is because there is an internalized, almost unconscious assumption of able-bodiedness in art and architecture theory and praxis – if the assumption becomes "disrupted" by non-normative corporeal forms, then these forms have historically been rejected, and marked as pathological, diseased, and "other." Walker's own Corban rule works as an antithesis to these deeply entrenched ideals.

Tracing a line: minimalism, post-minimalism and Jacob

Wendy Jacob is an American artist whose work bridges traditions of sculpture, invention and design, and explores relationships between architecture and perceptual and bodily

experience. Given Jacob's interest in body and space, she has said it was natural for her to find a way into disability studies. Recent projects have involved collaboration with architects, engineers, circus performers, and working with deaf and autistic individuals. In 2007, Jacob developed a project entitled *Between Spaces*, which involved a professional tightrope walker (whom she recruited from a local circus company) balancing and walking on a thirty-eight-foot practice tightrope wire. The tightrope walker moved from a third floor gallery by stepping out the window and crossing six feet to the stacks of an Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) library next door, which involved traversing over a thirty-foot drop (Figure 21.4). The performance only lasted minutes, and it was only by chance if a visitor happened to be in the space to witness it.

A precursor to this project, *Line, Cambridge* (2005), was when Jacob ran a tightrope wire through the living room of a home in Cambridge and had a performer cross it while the family dined in the next room during Thanksgiving (Figure 21.5). Jacob's lines are effectively cutting through public and private space by way of open windows, thus demonstrating the permeability of assumed borders, but also slicing through any "normal" neutrality of architectural and social space.

These projects led Jacob to focus on *Explorers Club* in 2009, which was a series of photographs documenting two years of explorations through the meandering logic of a line, and chronicling the adventures of a twelve-year-old autistic boy named Stefano Micali, as he shapes and defines urban space according to his particular visual and spatial perspective. According to a discussion I had with Jacob in November 2013, Stefano found it reassuring to trace public and private space with string or tape, given his concern around how space is ordered. Jacob has said that "although his sight is perfectly fine, [Micali] has challenges integrating visual spatial information, particularly large, open spaces. He has devised tactics for framing or subdividing space, such as wearing eyeglass frames, even though he doesn't need corrective lenses, and running string around his room" (Badger and Jacob 2011: 4). Given Jacob had been working on projects where she was altering space with lines as discussed above, it made sense for her to work with Micali, who had a similar interest. He decided to call their project and its ensuing activities *Explorers Club*.

They spent the next two years travelling all over Boston and Cambridge by laying down and unrolling long lines of vinyl marking tape and temporarily restructuring and organizing the city with florescent orange lines. Jacob explains that her project was not about the condition of autism per se, but rather "the experience of being with a particular person (Stefano) and his particular way of organizing the world" (2011: 4). What is it to re-imagine the world through an alternative perspective? What new ways of thinking about space might develop? At first, Jacob had Micali divide up her studio with tape to create smaller rooms, which eventually led to the division of space with masking tape at the MIT gym, followed by going outdoors, including even the subway system. While Micali laid out the tape, Jacob attempted to document the process, and another friend would go behind reeling in the yards and yards of tape (Figure 21.6).

Through Jacob's projects involving line, the artist is conveying how bodies in space can be expressed differently. She does this by using tightropes and vinyl tape as modes of interruption, definition and spatial agency. In her projects where lines cut through architecture, the artist effectively "disables" any assumptions that built space has a

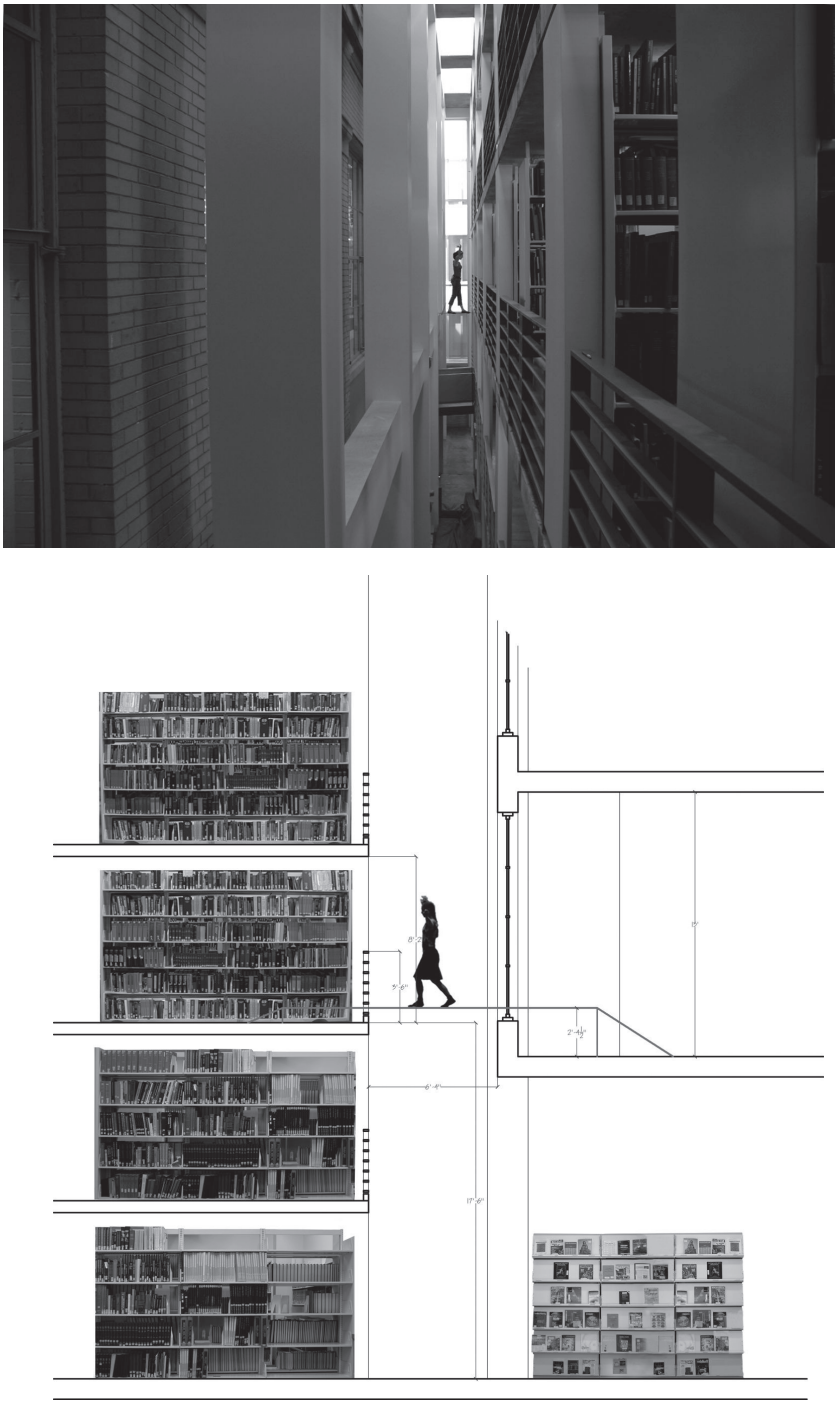

FIGURE 21.4 Wendy Jacob (2007) *Between Spaces*, Wolk Gallery and Rotch Library, MIT, September 20, 2007.

Source; Photos courtesy of the artist.

FIGURE 21.5 Wendy Jacob (2005) *Line, Cambridge,* Performance at 21 Bowdoin St, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Source: Photo courtesy of the artist.

definitive form or function. Through the interjection of bodies moving unusually or atypically from one space to another, we come to understand that architecture is malleable and open to manipulation and even political ends. In Micali's negotiation of space and his urban environment, he finds it useful to lay down lines as a means to manage his spatial anxiety and, in the process, he offers opportunities for his non-autistic collaborators to experience a familiar space differently. Weaving through and under miles of tape, the participants began to understand how passages through space can be experienced through an alternative complex embodiment. Like Duchamp in *First Papers of Surrealism*, Jacob is reinforcing the rupture of the generalized or universalized "we" in the habitation of

FIGURE 21.6 Wendy Jacob with Stefano Micali (2009) *Explorer's Club*, Boston, MA.

Source: Photos courtesy of the artist.

space, and instead reminds us of bodies as singular and independent entities, traversing many paths (Demos 2001). She says that the more typical pedestrian who cuts through space likely doesn't think about alternative "non-normal" patterns of mobility, and while Jacob's intent is not politicized from the outset, she realizes that making work from the perspective of one who is autistic comes with connotations of otherness that is steeped in histories of oppression and invisibility. Echoing Duchamp's project of displacement via his twine spiderweb, Jacob destabilizes conventional codes of path-making and way-finding in the division and splitting up of space with Micali (Kachur 2001) (Figure 21.7).

In "Topological Pathways of post-Minimalism," Eric de Bruyn expresses how important it became for minimalist artists to develop a different geometry in order to "map this multidirectional, intensive experience of space" (2006: 34). De Bruyn was referring to artist Dan Graham's observation that some post-minimalist sculptural practices were deviating from the Euclidean geometry so readily found in Minimal sculpture during the 1970s. Graham called this geometrical shift a topological "process of alteration," where the

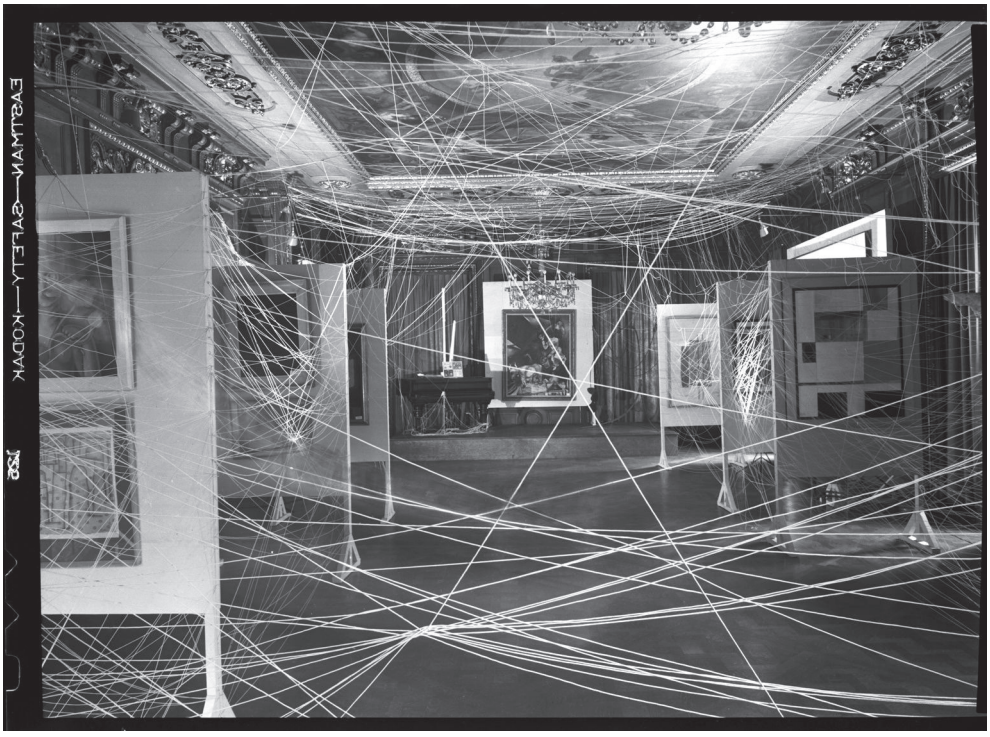

FIGURE 21.7 Schiff, John D. (1907–1976). Installation View of Exhibition 'First Papers of Surrealism' Showing String Installation. 1942. Gelatin silver print. Image/Sheet/Mount (Sheet/Image/Mount): 7 5/8 x 10 inches (19.4 x 25.4cm). Gift of Jacqueline, Paul and Peter Matisse in memory of their mother Alexina Duchamp. 13-1972-9(303) Philadelphia Museum of Art. Marcel Duchamp: © Succession Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2016

Photo credit: The Philadelphia Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY.

artist is "composing the composition" rather than starting with an authorial template or frame (de Bruyn 2006: 34). Within this space, de Bruyn proposes that there are no fixed boundaries, and "no central position of focus are available to the observer" (2006: 35). Following this, I am particularly interested in the question that de Bruyn poses – "what critical relevance does this history of the topological pathways of postminimalism yield for us today?"(2006: 37). I would suggest that the topological pathways of post-minimalism has yielded rich ground in which artists like Jacob and Walker can explore the subjectivity of disability. Jacob and Micali's *Explorers Club* and Jacob's *Between Spaces* have clearly constructed an "other" topological pathway that has similar scope and vision to the work of post-minimalism in their aspirations to compose, and stay connected to, a "deterritorialized space of drifting signs and bodies" (2006: 40). Like the work of Dan Graham, Jacob and Micali are transgressing the "striated space of an institutional practice of art" (2006: 40) because their line-making is not contained to the minimalist, Euclidean grid of the white cube gallery space. Instead, the florescent wobbly lines and the tightropes are harnessing a more complex relationship to the public spaces of full networks of information and spatial encounters. From a Foucaultian perspective, de Bruyn says that Graham's (and I'll add Jacob's) topology moves "outside the spatial matrix of disciplinary power," essentially liberating the disabled subject from reductive frameworks and models that aim to confine and constrain" (2006: 41).

By placing art works into urban space. Jacobs releases them to a larger and more public world than the gallery. Rudolf Arnheim says that the frame "defines the reality status of works of art as distinguished from the setting of daily life." It has a visible detachment from reality, and "confines the range of the picture" (1982: 52). But if for Arnheim, such a distancing is central to artistic appreciation, for Jacob the art is challenging precisely *because* it cannot necessarily be distinguished from daily life, and nor can the viewer be certain that they are looking at this work from the outside. The viewer is now implicated in the work, blurring the lines between inside/outside, control/freedom and more. Both *Between Spaces* and *Explorers Club* also offer the "lived reality of the urban milieu" that happens to include complex embodiment (De Bruyn 2006: 45), and so talk back to normative attitudes to space and its average occupation.

Conclusion

In the contemporary art installations of Corban Walker and Wendy Jacob, a new disabled geometry of space is configured, that starts from "non-normal" experiences expressed and interrogated through the power of lines that rupture, interrupt and decenter. Most critically, Jacob and Walker's works powerfully contribute to a theory of body–environment relations, where disabled subjectivity can offer new experimental modes of thinking and being through art, architecture and space that is never neutral, always political, and always dynamic. There can no longer be an assumed "average" or normative uniformity in how to engage or respond to a work of art when we remember all the variegated forms of knowing and being in space; just as there can be no one universal design in architecture or single-point perspective to buildings and public spaces. These artists disrupt any certainty of an aesthetic or spatial given, by revealing that the juxtaposition between bodily relations in

space is much more heterogeneous than typically assumed. The participant conditions of both artists and audiences are now mediated and individualized through psychological, sensory and social modes that do not claim homogeneity or standardization. Rather, making work based on corporeal complexity offers a form of critical artistic practice centered on experiential engagements with viewers that insists on revealing the particularities of different embodiments-in-space. In these processes the potentialities of material space are also opened up, to re-orientation and radical interpretation.