

Unruly Salon Forum

Guest Editors' Introduction: Coming to Pride - Joining "The Unruly Salon"

Leslie G. Roman, Ph.D.
University of British Columbia
&
Catherine Frazee, D.Litt.
Ryerson University

In 2005-2006, following a devastating first-time depression, I found my transparent short-lived unselfconscious or unwitting closet exceedingly small and isolating. It is funny, that is, both strange and wonderful, how memory of certain phrases and mantras returns when least expected as if stored for an unforeseen future time. James Charleton's phrase, taken from the title of his book, "Nothing About Us Without Us" (2000), reached forward in my consciousness as a comfort-force, an imaginary and yet very real soon-to-be-confirmed collective mind-body politic.

Returning to my first passion, the performing arts, I drew up a proposal to an interdisciplinary visiting speakers' series endowment, The Ida and Cecil Green Award, bestowed annually at Green College, the University of British Columbia (UBC). To my great glee, it was enthusiastically received and awarded the largest single amount in the history of the endowment, \$49,500 (CAD). With these funds, I called upon the expertise of Geoff Mc Murchy, Artistic Director for the kickstART Festival, inviting him to collaborate as the Artistic Director for the Unruly Salon series. And I invited Catherine Frazee, co-director of the Ryerson University Disabilities Studies Program in Toronto, Ontario, to launch the series by giving the keynote address, which is included in its entirety in this volume.

Leslie G. Roman

Coming to Pride

The acronym for the Unruly Salon, "US" refers to Charleton's idea that all too often people with disabilities are the subjects of a gaze, which medicalizes, criminalizes or produces objectifying pity. A host of circulating images, signs, and discourses contribute to the sometimes overwhelming sense that people with disabilities do not represent themselves as the active agents of their own self-authorized narratives. The agency of people with disabilities to create culture that defies such understandings is unruly. This mind-body politic is the lifeforce of the global disability arts and culture movement.

As provocateur of conscience and imagination, The Unruly Salon Series combined internationally-regarded scholars of disability studies with professional artists from a range of

performing arts (e.g., musicians, painters, actors, dancers, poets), for a series of self and collective disability representations. The event was held at the University of British Columbia and presented at Green College, an interdisciplinary residential college. The Unruly Salon Series, which ran from January 12 until March 29, 2008, consisted of seven performances by professional artists and scholars with disabilities – from renowned comedian, David Roche, who turns facial difference into soulful and biting reflection, to Vancouver-based actress, Victoria Maxwell, who sheds new light on “mental illness” in a solo show about her experience with bipolar disorder. UBC’s launch of The Unruly Salon has been a watershed, an inauguration that invited the public to learn and hear the voices of people with disabilities as distinguished artists, scholars and members of our community.

In the following pages, we share a taste of the creative work and scholarship that was presented at the Unruly Salon or emerged from it. We include the opening remarks of President and Vice Chancellor Stephen J. Toope, who graciously and enthusiastically supported the Salon Series, and closing remarks by David Anderson, who shared his reflections as a disabled student, embracing the Salons as emergent, vibrant, yet fragile spaces.

Our opening Salon distinguished panel included celebrated film-maker, Bonnie Klein, whose film, *Shameless: The Art of Disability*, was shown alongside Geoff Mc Murchy’s dance film, *Wingspan Three*. The panel staked a claim for space on a campus that had not publicly or formally established a disability studies program at either the undergraduate or graduate levels. Claiming place and space is not merely metaphorical; it is very much a political statement of goals which require public action:

“I dream of creating a place where we can dare to be our most authentic, glorious, outrageous selves. ... a vision of a possible future.”

Bonnie S. Klein

Artists and scholars with disabilities are creating authentic images and speaking directly from lived experiences, addressing ideas and subject matter that have never been presented to the public. In both content and form, we are taking risks which only we dare, taking a bite out of entrenched stereotypes of charity, pity, deviancy and criminality.

According to Geoff Mc Murchy, the first kickstART! Celebration staged by the Society for Disability Arts and Culture in Vancouver in 2001 marked Canada’s entry into the vibrant, global disability arts and culture movement. The Unruly Salon Series built on kickstART’s momentum and pride as UBC presented its first major disability arts and culture series. The Unruly Salon unearthed fresh opportunities for collaborative and transformative disability arts and culture research in which people with disabilities take the lead.

This forum offers a sampling of artistic and scholarly work from the Unruly Salon. We begin with a “generative conversation,” harmonizing three Salon voices thinking aloud about disability, arts and scholarship. Here Mc Murchy reminds us that this is an exciting space, “where art morphs into academia and audience becomes activist.” His observation segues neatly to an exploration of “the spaces of not-knowingness that make possible new ways of imagining

disability,” as Chris Lee recounts his experience of working with the Laser Eagles, negotiating the delicate terrain of authentic individual – yet collaborative – acts of creation.

Lee's examination of the politics and contingencies of translation prepare the ground for Leslie Roman's introduction to the compelling woodcuts of Tania Willard, visual artist from the Secwepemc Nation. Willard's explorations of Aboriginal history and madness inspired Roman et al. to explore the interconnections among medicalization, asylum-making and residential schools for people with disabilities (in press). Are “hidden histories” more or less powerful when exposed to the light of day, treated imaginatively and subjected to critical analysis? One could imagine them as vortexes exerting a strong pull away from social life and political engagement. Or are our “barricaded bunkers,” as Lynn Manning suggests in his startlingly evocative poem, actually the source out of which imagination reaches up to arouse the somnambulant mind?

A creative fusion of narrative, ethnography, and scholarship allows Sheena Brown to explore in-depth the notion that “disability is a job” that creates and supports many other jobs in its quotidian encounters with the regimes that order our lives. And just as Brown excavates Monica's invisible and unaccounted contributions to the Gross National Product, Roman's “Thunderous Ode” gives artful voice to the work of survival -- chronicling struggles ranging from the syllabic to the cosmic. Her poem and their accompanying three paintings fuse unexpected color and the “waking pulses of memory and affect.”

Roman's question, “How much more – much more I work to be?” then juxtaposes with Victoria Maxwell's playful riff on the improvisatory work of disclosure. “I think it’s quite like an art form,” she declares, wryly reminding us that the work of self-representation requires both wit and pluck in generous measure. Her monologue from “Laid,” composed in the genre of culinary adventure, offers a fitting desert for the Disability Arts sampler offered up in this issue.

Of course, no Salon would be complete without the pleasures of an after-party, with glasses toasted and lively conversation. David Anderson reminds us that, sites of intellectual and social community spring from engaging, responsive, and nourishing universities. In the spirit of such robust, innovative public spaces, we toast our issue contributors and audience co-creators.

Welcome then, to the Unruly Salon!

References

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