Opening Generative and Innovative Public Spaces for Disability Arts, Culture and Scholarship

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> "The impact of disability scholarship, while important for contributing to a new way of thinking and talking about disability, is so slow and indirect that it takes a long time to feel as though one is making a difference. I know. I can say this about academic work because I am one [an academic], whereas artists and performers are able to reach into someone's ribcage and pull their heart out and do something in an immediate way. I envy that" (Roman & Buchan, 2008).

In the wee and the waking hours, over some weeks, kilometers and metaphorical mountains, the unruly trio of Geoff Mc Murchy, Catherine Frazee, and Leslie Roman exchanged ideas across our locations – separated geographically but shared politically. We created a hybrid common space—one of commitment, imagination and perseverance that thrives best in the collective consciousness of social justice and movement-making.

The following offers some of our reflections from a free-flowing conversation about the Unruly Salon Series and generating further opportunities in the field. Warning: For the academics, this may sound and read like the spoken word and for the artists, well, we hope you will not mind the occasional scholarly license taken.

1. *What enables generative and innovative spaces of disability arts, culture and scholarship to take place?*

Geoff: I'd like to use the descriptors "innovative" and "public" because on an individual level, the urge to express oneself artistically has always run through people with disabilities as much as anyone else. What's key, and provides interesting opportunities for innovation and public engagement, is the combination of this urge to express with a sense of social justice.

The latter sense has been nurtured through the self-help, independent living and disability advocacy movements. These movements, building one upon the other, prepared the ground for a disability arts and culture movement simply by bringing together people with disabilities – some of them artists – and by presenting the challenge of getting a message across to the general public. It would only be a matter of time before the power of "disability art" to reach people on deep, visceral levels would be utilized.

People with disabilities, who in their various states of being embody the question of what it

means to be human, are well-situated to offer answers. Their narratives, often potent with raw humanity, can be profoundly moving. The risk that the community runs, though, is that the emotional potency will be exploited by others. Thus the importance of the slogan adopted by the Unruly Salon Series: "Nothing about us without us."

I love this quote from Victoria-Ann Lewis, past Director of the Other Voices program of the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles: *"It's our turn to tell the story. It's our turn to say who we are, where we come from, what the journey [is] about"* (as cited in Wade, 1998).

Of course, it wasn't only the advocacy movement that enabled disability arts and culture to flourish. Paralympic cultural events and therapeutic art programs, for examples, have also done their parts to bring together and nurture artists with disabilities (a group not inherently self-organizing). Many artists with disabilities have honed their skills alone, isolated either socially or geographically. It's part our jobs as organizers of disability arts festivals, salons and other events, to draw these people out, nurture their development and have their talents recognized.

In more recent years it has been these risk-takers and visionaries who have hastened the development of a disability arts and culture movement in its own right. They have provided a milieu rich with opportunities for cross-fertilization of both artistic practices and various disability perspectives. A cross-disability and multidisciplinary approach is an explosive recipe for innovation. It has followed naturally, because of the very compelling nature of the art itself, that audiences and funding have been drawn to this work.

Leslie: There is a sense that university spaces can be used or claimed by communities outside them. This is, after all, the ideal notion of a public – not an economically-gated community or one full of discriminatory attitudes, inaccessible buildings or unwelcoming environs. An innovative public works for the expansion of whom it includes, speaks with and engages. A radical democratic public examines its own exclusions, margins and centers, and finds ways to challenge whose knowledge and experience matters. It moves over to make space for the needs and interests of marginalized communities. Such communities then become the domain of the public, for the common good. Such a public works best when it is involved, as Catherine said so well in her opening keynote, as a "roll-up-your-sleeves audience." It also works best, as David Anderson – staff and student with a visual impairment, who took the disability culture course linked with the Salon Series – spoke at the last Salon, when students with disabilities are "engaged," as they were during the Salon Series, "not as passive consumers of disability services but as active agents of our own experiences" (Anderson, 2008). I might add: it works best when universities become genuinely public and welcoming places of community and history.

Catherine: In his open letter to our Canadian Prime Minister, published in Le Devoir as a reluctant nation stirred itself for a third election in four years, Wajdi Mouawad (2008) wrote:

> *"... [P]olitics and art have always mirrored one another, each on its own shore, each seeing itself in the other, separated by that river where life and death are weighed at every moment."*

We live in desperately dangerous times, all of us, as our ether churns with the sulphurs of greed

and contempt, as our social landscapes pivot on the fulcrum of efficiency, and as men, women and children each day succumb to the great lie that strength is power and that what defies measure has no value. As disabled people, we are seduced to conform, coerced to make do with less than our due, and pressed to make way for the lean, the quick, the fit. And across Mouawad's metaphoric river, what do we see? The distortions of fear, antipathy and indifference, tableaux in which we are at worst unwelcome and at best unexpected, reflections of selves at the same time reduced and rendered grotesque.

The way I see it, *politics* are what animate disability arts. The politics of our claims to space and recognition, the politics of our assertions of beauty and grace, the politics of our sexual and spiritual liberation, the politics of our stories, our perspective, our voices -- the politics of our belonging.

How does this happen? It happens under the crushing weight of tired old ideas about what a community needs to flourish—or, a nation, or a civilization, for that matter. New ideas press through the clay.

How can we ensure that more Disability Art happens? Oh, the usual things. Money. Critical attention. Audiences. Opportunities for creative collaboration. Money. A supportive infrastructure. The free flow of ideas and energy. Categories to resist. Walls to push back against. Stares to return. Money. Training and tools. Rigorous standards for accessibility. Documentation. Cross-pollination. Committed insiders and entrepreneurs. Patrons. And did I mention money?

2. *Reflect on your hopes, successes, and expectations for the Unruly Salon.*

Geoff: For me as a co-creator, the success of the Unruly Salon Series was measured largely by audience reactions. Simply put, they were moved, they were excited and they wanted more. Other indicators were the support shown by the academic community – firstly, the generous financial support offered by Green College and second, the attendance by many scholars from various departments at UBC – right up to the President of UBC himself!

One can't really hope for the gift of a supporter like Green College on an ongoing basis, but I certainly have hopes that ways will be found to cobble together budgets for future series, from other sources.

The long-term hope is that UBC will institute a disability studies program at the graduate and undergraduate levels. I don't know what's involved, or how long it will take to achieve that goal. But if it's just a matter of opening hearts and minds, then we've made a splendid start.

Catherine: I had no role as you two did in organizing the Salons, but as an invited keynote presenter, I suppose that my main hope was that work presented from the Disability Arts frontier would be irresistible to the Salon audience, and indications are that it was. My present hope is that this work will increasingly be taken up by academics of many disciplines, because interdisciplinarity is fertile and academics are good at it: Sifting through material and phenomena in ways that illuminate the hidden layers and complexities, breaking open categories

and offering new ways of seeing, reckoning, valuing. This Journal issue is a good sign that that process is underway.

I wasn't physically at the Salon, but I breezed in for the opening, cyborg-style, via video link one night in January. So I'm glad to hear from you a little more of the texture of this successful merger. If you've got happy contributors at the end of the day, that's a good sign. Our artists deserve nothing less than a well-equipped venue packed to the gills with an audience that will follow them to the top of the summit, hell, over the edge of the cliff if need be; an audience that will line up in uneven, untidy rows for tickets and cram themselves in with bodies of every kind and description just because there is something momentous happening and they feel compelled to be part of it. It sounds like everyone got what they deserved.

Leslie: One of the Salons inspired discussion of postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of a "third space" and how this concept might be applied to our efforts with the series. Education Faculty member, Bonney Norton, who attended several of our Salons, brought this concept into our working audience discussions. She talked about the Salons as "a third space" in which art and scholarship by people with disabilities representing themselves created a zone of connection and inter-connection with its audience that directed everyone's engagement to new and different space that performed being human through our differences and not through easily separable or objectifying categories... (Norton, audience reflections, 2008, Salon One).

For me as one of the co-creators and a scholar/artistic presenter, the most exciting thing about the Unruly Salon Series was its reach to the unexpected but hoped for audiences. Each Salon spoke to and with different audiences who came to participate in community that was a melding of arts and scholarship, both reflective and reflexive – a place to belong, to create a new way of imagining and practicing critical disability studies. It was rousing and exciting to have President Toope open the event. Equally important was the appearance of many constituencies who have felt marginalized or out of place speaking about such issues on the campus of UBC, most especially students with disabilities. That speaks of what the Salon Series evoked and how it worked. An invisible act of research is to stimulate not just community outreach but what I will call "community in-reach." Students, faculty and staff who identify with disability, both as persons with disabilities and without, are also a community often overlooked.

At the last Salon, Geoff opened the floor to the audience, as was usual by one or more moderating. It was a stormy, treacherous night to get there, with rain and snow on the roads. Despite that, we still had an audience! I remember one comment from the back of the room; a young woman who had been doing camera work for us through collaboration with Gallery Gachet, an artistic institution started in 1992 which provides a meeting ground for dialog among outsider and dissident artists living with mental health issues in one of Vancouver's hardest hit economically disenfranchised communities downtown. The Gallery offers opportunities to curate, exhibit, perform, read, teach and craft leadership skills to dissident outsider artist (cf. She said something to the effect that were several ways to feel about the public responses to people with disabilities: One was to hold your feelings inside and not be heard; another was to get pissed off and regret it later or be misunderstood, and a third was to do what the Salons had, show people who we are and how we feel. I remember that comment for its insight.

Geoff: With regard to the "third space" idea, we did see some blurring of boundaries, in which some presenters were both academics and artists. Some of those considered "purely" academic presenters became more performative in their presentations, and some of the performers offered analyses of their work in a disability culture context, which they normally wouldn't feel compelled to do.

Leslie: During the audience question and answer period, scholars and artists together answered questions in thoughtful ways, bringing a new synergy of passion, intellect and emotion to a university public space. Unlike conventional scholarly panels, the Unruly Salon series created a terrain where scholarship becomes artful and audiences, performers, and scholars alike communed in a space that is publicly riveting and emotionally engaged. It is a space that is all too rare.

Geoff: This is very interesting terrain, where art morphs into academia and audience becomes activist. I hope that these explorations will continue to find fertile ground, not only at UBC and other educational institutions, but outside their hallowed halls and elsewhere in communities.

3. *Do you have tips and considerations for others who may want to explore this terrain, across the locations of community and academic institution?*

Catherine: Tips and considerations...Hmmm... Where to begin? Okay, a short list from my own experience -- I suspect it resonates with yours. Rule one in my book, is that we must do absolutely everything we can possibly do to honor the work. This includes paying the artists a professional rate and providing them with the best we can afford in the way of venue, technical support, stage personnel and so on. And if an artist doesn't ask for much, sing them a line from Leonard Cohen -- "Hey, why not ask for more?" (Cohen, 1994, p. 144). Establish and demand high production values. Lead the way with access, for both performers and audience members. Make sure that the budget set for the event includes state-of-the-art accommodations from the word go – access is not an add-on!! Signal the importance of the work in every tangible way you can, including aggressive promotion and courting of media contacts.

Rule two: understand, appreciate and respect our audience. Expect to host a wide range of publics -- from the initiated and savvy to the curious neophyte. Some are friends, neighbors, teachers, therapists – many of whom have some personal or professional connection to disability. An important few are potential collaborators in disability-culture-making, whether as artists, producers, critics or scholars or a blend of both. Honor them all. Flirt a little. But push them too.

Rule three: be ready to negotiate. Disability culture thrives in contested ground. Many artists tackle controversial subject matter, and the best of them are highly irreverent in their approach. Most of them make an effort to offend the right people and to avoid alienating their allies, but they do tend to tread a fragile line. Producers need to be prepared to stand by their artists, defend their right to cross lines and get in people's faces. After all, artists generally do get a kick out of sniffing out taboos. It's part of the interpretive role of curator to recognize and respect these dimensions of disability art, and to accept the challenge of interpretation. Mediator, priest, referee, diplomat, healer, hustler -- a good producer is all of these, and much more.

And Rule four: never lose sight of the goal, and that is social change. It's not about building empire, or legacy or professional niche. It's not about the thrills, the adrenaline, the love affairs, the buzz -- that's all well and good, and none of us would have it any other way. But there's a bigger picture here, and we know it in our core. Disabled people are still struggling, many barely clinging to the hope for decent, meaningful lives. And we want that to change.
Remember Wajdi Mouawad's (2008) closing insight:

> "... [I]f it is prime ministers who change the world, it's the artist who will show this to the world."

Geoff: A few details spring to mind… First, I want to underline Catherine's comments about honoring the work, especially by paying the artists and maintaining the highest production values possible. Of course, there may be trade-offs in production values when creating a smaller "salon space" but when this is clearly understood, many artists welcome the opportunity for more intimate encounters with an audience.

Another aspect of honoring the artist is to stick to the agenda and avoid running overtime. It's important for many performers to build their energy toward their entrance, and not to have to wait in limbo to be "on." Running overtime also had the detrimental effect of cutting into discussion/reception time, a component of crucial importance to the concept of salon. This is where communities cross over and ideas intermingle; where new storylines and collaborative ideas can be generated.

Admittedly, creating the first Unruly Salon Series was a conscious process of learning for the co-creators, whose experience drew upon different realms representing different communities and cultures – academia and the arts. It was a matter of averaging some differences and being attentive to details, like lecterns for the academics and a green room for the performers.

As a venue, Green College was homey and salon-like but as we added the equipment necessary to fulfill our obligations to accessibility as well as to generate video documentation, it became slightly smaller than ideal. There is a balance to be considered in maintaining an atmosphere of intimacy and critical discussion, while involving enough audience (with their various access needs) to make the work worthwhile.

In our case, with the priority of generating interest in a disability studies program at UBC, it made sense to offer the series on campus (and in fact we were obliged by our primary funding source to use their facilities). The UBC campus, though, is situated at the extreme West side of Vancouver and as such presents a bit of a transportation barrier. With different priorities, I can imagine other creative possibilities for venues, perhaps dispersed throughout the community in different locations appropriate to the theme of each Salon.

Leslie: I agree with Geoff and would like to find ways to expand the work and the perception of university space as versatile public space, by taking the Unruly Salon out into the wider community off-campus, and back and forth. Venues often determine accessibility and speak to who may be included or not. With some versatility and imagination, students and faculty can

enjoy the benefits of locating themselves in community venues, and vice versa. It would be great to see UBC build its first-ever fully accessible media-equipped Disability Centre for the Performing Arts for exhibits, plays, dance, music, etc., equipped with universal design features. This could become a Canadian and world-renowned Centre, not only for future Unruly Salons but also for classes held in a disability studies program that form in tandem with such a Centre. Imagine this: you're a high-school student with a disability living in Canada or elsewhere; how attractive would such a Centre at UBC be for your undergraduate or future graduate work? How would such a space attract diverse communities from all over the world into the space of the praxis of global citizenship, of human belonging, and democratic participation? Hallowed halls would become homes away from home, inaccessible buildings would be barrier-free to everyone, including the elderly, parents with strollers, and yes, people with disabilities. This would be a space of life-long learning, community in-reach and community outreach, an arts-based scholarship community of global learning equipped with voice-recognition technologies, Braille signage, interpreter services and flexible wheel-chair-friendly space. And, with all the resources to expand on-line and distance learning, think how cyberspace, new media and digital technologies can be used to extend educational opportunities in such a Centre, for the inclusion of unruly bodies and minds. It is there that the long term and realistic meanings of global citizenship meet with the political will to make social change that benefits all humanity in our splendid variety and creativity.

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