

Re-Thinking Interdependence, Subjectivity, and Politics Through the Laser Eagles Art Guild
Chris Lee
University of British Columbia

Abstract: This article considers how a university-based graduate seminar and a disability arts and cultural series interact to create positive combustion and render disability a little less stable in its reading. Inspired by the series entitled the Unruly Salon and the author's own involvement with the Laser Eagles Art Guild, an arts group emphasizing the collaborations of people with disabilities and their able-bodied peers, this article offers a preliminary discussion of the notions of interdependence and translation as they relate to, and problematize, normative understandings of disability and the autonomous subject.

Key Words: interdependence, arts, Unruly Salon

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Introduction

In January 2008, I was enrolled in a graduate seminar in the University of British Columbia's Educational Studies Department entitled, "The Medicalization of Education and Society: In/visible 'Citizens' in the Unruly Salon Act Up." One of the aims of this course was to examine the social context of disability, as well as to engage with diverse disability studies scholarship and performers by artists with disabilities who could creatively speak different experiences of disability. The seminar was closely integrated with the Unruly Salon series, which was replete with talks and performances revealing a plethora of often-contradictory discourses about disability, in which current notions of disability were challenged, re-affirmed, re-imagined and inevitably rendered just a little less stable. Inspired by the Salons and my involvement with the Laser Eagles Art Guild, an arts group emphasizing the collaborations of people with disabilities and their able-bodied peers, this paper offers a preliminary discussion of the notions of interdependence and translation as they relate to, and problematize, normative understandings of disability and the autonomous subject.

As someone who experiences severe depression and has undergone treatment, witnessing the performances in the Salon series was illuminating insofar as it revealed fluidity in the notion of disability. In my life outside graduate studies, where I work in social services supporting people with physical and cognitive disabilities to live independently in the community, I am able to see how disability is a category imposed on individuals. Yet, I have found that these individuals are often denied the opportunity to speak back, to challenge disability as a stable, uncontested construction, as they must rely on negative connotations of disability to secure financial and material supports. What this signals is that the disability experience continually shifts, interacting on a material and conceptual level. Hence disability can be worn with shame or claimed with pride (as exemplified by many performers in the Unruly Salon series).

Reflecting on my own experiences as "invisibly disabled" (a term I did not know at the time of my depression), at times rejecting or claiming this label when it served me, I am intrigued by the ways in which individuals interact to shape how disability is articulated and

rearticulated. Moreover, I am struck at how disability is unstable in my everyday relationships with individuals who resolutely deny the existence of disability, even though they are seen by society for the most part as disabled.

Therefore, one of the impetuses for this paper stems from my experiences living in Toronto (2005-2007) working as a personal support worker for Judith Snow, a disability rights advocate and an artist, who has been at the forefront of the inclusion movement in Canada for the past thirty years. Through this relationship, I became involved with the Laser Eagles Art Guild, a group co-founded by Snow, which brings together people with physical and mental disabilities with able-bodied peers to create art. Integral to the art-making processes utilized by the Guild was the idea and act of interdependence, an idea I would argue is crucial for opening up a space to re-think subjectivity, citizenship and community.

By emphasizing interdependence within the context of Laser Eagles, I hope to bring out some of the tensions that arise in the process of translating self-representation. As examined through the lens of the Laser Eagles' art-making process, translation can be seen as an act of interpreting various modes of communication and being. Moreover, translation arises in the interplay of different bodies and minds and is integral to the resulting forms of self-expression and self-representation. Attending to this tension can offer insight into the complex production and re-production of individual and group identities. However, in addressing interdependence, it is important to note the political and ethical implications implied by re-thinking how disability is understood across all facets of society. This paper constitutes an attempt to weave together some of these threads, threads that were on display at the Unruly Salon Series, a display which will hopefully lead to different and creative understandings and expressions of disability.

Expanding Disability – Third Spaces

Throughout the 1900s and 2000s, the field of Disability Studies has been adept at arguing for a “social model” of disability by rejecting “medical model” understandings. The social model places responsibility for disability on the social environment, arguing that structures fail to adapt to the needs and requirements of people with disabilities, rather than vice versa. Yet on the other hand, it is also necessary to recognize the effects having a physical and/or mental impairment has on support structures. As disability scholar Tom Shakespeare (2006) notes, “Human beings are not all the same, and do not have the same capabilities and limitations. Need is variable and disabled people are among those who need more from others and from their society” (p. 67). This draws attention to the widespread political importance of thinking about disability within the context of dependence as an ever-arising and fluctuating experience for all individuals. As Alasdair MacIntyre writes:

“A form of political society in which it is taken for granted that disability and dependence on others are something that all of us experience at certain times in our lives and this to unpredictable degrees, and that consequently our interest in how the needs of the disabled are adequately voiced and met is not a special interest, the interest of one political group rather than of others, but rather the interest of the whole political society, an interest that is integral to their conception of the common good” (as cited in Shakespeare, 2006, p. 67).

Yet this notion of disability needs to be expanded. Although it does address the needs of individuals and is broad enough to pay attention to the multitudinous ways in which disabled people require support, it is limiting in that it fails to take into account the fluid manner in which dependence is articulated. Without denying the significance of addressing how society disables people or renders them as “impaired,” it is also important to examine how the impairment as a social process necessitates interaction between individuals. It is not simply a matter of addressing the ways in which material needs are met (thus how certain individuals *depend* on others), but looking more closely at how interactions between individuals create different ways in which *interdependence* is manifested. In this sense, interdependence can be thought of as moving beyond an articulation of needs, as moving into a space of creativity where meaning individual, cultural and political levels are formulated and re-formulated.

One way to approach this notion of interdependence is to draw upon post-colonial scholar Homi Bhabha’s (1994) concept of a “Third Space”:

“[A Third Space] constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that meaning and symbols of culture have not primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs of culture can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (p. 37).

Bhabha’s (1994) conception of a “third space” reminds us, “We should remember that it is the ‘inter’ – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in between space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (p. 38). In proposing this space in which culture can be imagined anew, Bhabha states he wishes to “elude the politics of polarity” (p. 39) that draw attention to binary modes of thinking that depend on firm distinctions of the self and the other. What emerges is an instability where the self and the other slide and shift, revealing contradictory mechanisms inherent in their production. Similarly, claiming an individual and group identity is also rife with these tensions, tensions Bhabha notes are crucial to grasp:

“What remains to be thought is the *repetitious* desire to recognize ourselves, as, at once, decentered in the solidary processes of the political group, and yet, ourselves as consciously committed, even individualized, agent of change – the bearer of belief” (p. 65).

By attending to the spaces in-between, a political imperative becomes apparent. The repetition of various identities becomes a form of re-thinking the social and the culture as they necessarily interact. What this requires is a greater understanding of the ways in which categories of difference, such as disability, are produced, and in turn, produce new meaning. As Bhabha states:

“We may have to force the limits of the social as we know it to rediscover a sense of political and personal agency through the unthought within the civic and the psychic realms. This may be no place to end but it may be a place to begin” (p. 65).

Interdependence and Contested Categories in Laser Eagles

With this in mind, I would like to return to the Toronto-based Laser Eagles Art Guild, a group engaged in challenging social constructions of disability through the practice of art. At the

same time, the group relies on a process of interdependence that exemplifies a space in which uncertainty is allowed and alternative, contested social and political formations are articulated.

Laser Eagles was established in the fall of 2004 by Judith Snow and Franziska Trauttsmandorff as a non-profit organization dedicated to providing opportunities for people with disabilities to make art, the primary medium of expression being painting. Initial funding came from Clarica/SunLife, grants provided by the Toronto and Ontario Arts Councils, and donations obtained through private donors. Currently, Laser Eagles operates out of two locations – a community health center in South Etobicoke (part of the Greater Toronto Area) and a city-run community arts center in North-Western Toronto.

The approximately thirty artists who are a part of Laser Eagles have varying levels of physical and mental impairment. The one common element among them is the use of wheelchairs; however, some are verbal while others are non-verbal, some have use of their arms while many others do not. In order to paint, the artists rely on volunteer “trackers” who are able-bodied people who facilitate each artist’s vision by, in one sense, becoming an extension of their arms. Because each artist requires a different set of supports, the facilitation techniques are individualized. For example, an artist may use a laser pointer affixed to some part of his/her body to indicate a choice of brush, color and texture of paint and style of brush stroke. The laser is pointed at the canvas and the tracker carefully interprets the artist’s intentions. The artists also use other modes of communication to convey their intentions. Some talk or use communication boards or use facial and bodily expressions. In one case, Aaron (a pseudonym), an artist who is non-verbal and whose physical movements are essentially limited to his face, uses the barest of muscle twitches that guide his trackers who support his hand and paintbrush to move along the canvas.

This process can often be quite painstaking and require great patience on both the artist’s and tracker’s part. Time can also become disjointed insofar as the process asks participants to slow down and ensure that each person is being heard. The need to navigate each other’s mode of communication thus engenders creativity with respect to establishing ways to convey information and learning what to listen for. Although Laser Eagles employs “Master Trackers” who are professional artists, whose role is to train volunteers for the process of tracking, the real and substantial development occurs in the on going interaction between the artists and their trackers. While the mandate of Laser Eagles is, to further “the opportunity for self-expression and participation through the creation of art,” the Laser Eagles also offers up the following description of its guiding philosophy:

“All people have contributions to make to each other in community, acts that nurture the individual and the group. Yet, people with limited use of their bodies, those considered to be physically or mentally disabled by some, often lack the resources, structures and relationships necessary to fully express themselves and make their contributions” (Laser Eagles Art Guild, 2008).

Laser Eagles is committed to challenging how disability is understood by creating a space where disabled individuals can be free to not only participate in an activity that might not be readily available to them, but also to engage in relationships with other people. The effects of having access to such a space can be transformative in terms of the artist’s ability to express him/herself. Disability is rendered only one facet of identity. As Judith Snow states in an interview on the Laser Eagles (2008) website:

“It’s not so much that our bodies are limited – they are limited in their abilities – but what is really limited is what other people say about us and what other people see about us. And so it is the freedom to be seen outside of these limitations and to be known” (<http://www.lasereagles.org/pages/default.asp?catID=2>).

Snow’s remarks allude to a socially constructed understanding of disability, which Laser Eagles challenges by placing emphasis on the various contributions that every individual makes, in turn challenging people to acknowledge their contributions. On one level, this can be very conventional. Laser Eagles has actively sought to have its artists’ work displayed in “traditional” gallery settings and sold to the general public. Indeed, among its stated goals is to have the “arts community welcome and include Laser artists” (Laser Eagles Art Guild, 2008). This coincides with what Giles Perring (2005) calls a “*normalizing* approach” to art-and-disability projects, particularly where non-disabled artists are involved in a facilitative or collaborative role with people with disabilities that “focus on bringing performers with [disabilities] into mainstream performance discourse, often through the application of mainstream production values and aesthetic criteria” (p.185).

There is indeed an impulse amongst many of the Laser Eagles artists to bring their artistic practice and the works they produce into the broader arts community and have it recognized as valid. Moreover, the fact that there is a concerted effort made by Laser Eagles to have artworks sold, highlights the systematic manner in which essentially each artist, being the recipient of government financial support and thus subject to limitations on how much external income can be made, is excluded from participating in the economic realm. Being able to create a “product” for sale can therefore be read as an act challenging one’s limited access to the economy of exchange, while at the same time be indicative of the desire to participate and be seen to have value within the dominant mode of capital exchange.

Spending time at the painting sessions and conversations I shared with Judith Snow revealed that the Laser Eagles artists each have their own motivations for being members of the Guild (J. Snow, personal communication, April 16, 2008). As noted above, the impulse to have their artworks gain access to mainstream venues is a strong one for many of the artists. For some, this coincides with their intention to be viewed as “artists first.” For others, the inclination to be seen primarily as an artist might not be so strong, but there is a sense that painting sessions represent an ideal opportunity to meet with other people and socialize. Whatever the motivation, there is a demand that a dominant reason for participation not be imposed. Laser Eagles stays clear from defining itself in a limiting fashion, especially as a therapeutic enterprise. What is central is the desire for self-expression, underpinned by the act of painting, facilitated through social relationships that make it possible.

Nevertheless, there is an inherent tension in the collaborative process that the Laser Eagle artists utilize, especially in considering questions about the autonomy of the artist and the role that the tracker plays. There is a danger that exists in collaborative endeavors:

“In arts-and-disability projects, the manner in which non-disabled people approach the task of facilitating or collaborating in creative work by artists with [disabilities] has a crucial bearing on the extent that [disabled] experience and subjectivity is articulated” (Perring, 2005, p. 187).

This rightly draws attention to the situation whereby a tracker can easily usurp the artist’s self-expression and impose his/her own subjectivity onto the canvas. This can occur intentionally

or not, especially in cases where verbal expression is limited and the tracker has to be creative in ‘guessing’ (while also attempting to confirm that a guess is correct). How, while making the leap into expression, does one remain faithful to the spirit of the original source?

Translation

Understanding the act of translation allows instability to become apparent. Language, one aspect of the interplay between the artist and tracker, does not necessarily evoke a response readily translated through spoken or written word that results in visual expressions created by placing paint on a canvas. There is slippage in this process, despite the effort to capture and convey the totality of self-expression. As Walter Benjamin (1955/1968) writes:

“In translation the original rises into a higher and purer linguistic air, as it were. It cannot live there permanently, to be sure, and it certainly does not reach it in its entirety. Yet, in a singularity impressive manner, at least it points the way to this region: the predestined hitherto inaccessible realm of reconciliation and fulfillment of languages. The transfer can verb en total, but what reaches this region is that element in a translation that goes beyond transmittal of subject matter. This nucleus is best defined as the element that does not lend itself to translation” (p. 75).

Put into the context of Laser Eagles, Benjamin’s words can be seen to capture the Utopian impulse that exists behind Laser Eagles’ aspirations to create a space and process where individuals can “fully express themselves” (Laser Eagles Art Guild, 2008). Although the paintings created by Laser Eagle artists serve as an emblem of this goal, they also highlight the way in which the goal of full self-expression appears unattainable. Whatever is read into them will necessarily fall short of encompassing the individual and his/her subjectivity. Benjamin’s description of translation also serves a metaphoric purpose in re-conceptualizing the role of subjectivity. The movement from one source to another seems to gesture towards the inherent instability of the self-autonomous subject:

“Fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest of details, although they need not be alive one another. In the same way, a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel” (Benjamin, 1955/1968, p. 75).

However, “[Benjamin] is not saying that the fragments constitute a totality, he says fragments are fragments, and they remain essentially fragmentary” (as cited in Bhabha, 1994, pp. 268-269). As such, the relationship formed between an artist and a tracker does not result in one final and consummate expression of the artist’s subjectivity. Their interdependence can be interpreted variously as achieving the often-contradictory positions that each subject inhabits a fragmentary subject position. It points toward the manner in which subjectivity is produced in conjunction with other social beings, a theme I will attend to in greater detail below.

Destabilizing Self-Autonomy

Disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thompson's work (1997) offers another way to think about this instability of the self-autonomous subject in relation to disability. Utilizing Robert Murphy's formation of the "American Ideal" as an exemplar of the "normate" subject, she challenges this ideal by demonstrating how theorizing disability as encompassing an "extraordinary body" disrupts normate or self-autonomous subjectivity. Arguing that the American Ideal is premised on four interlocking ideological principles described as "self-government, self-determination, autonomy and progress" (p. 42). Garland-Thompson draws out parallels between the individual citizen and the (American) nation state. Juxtaposed against the disabled body, notions of the body (and body politic) as a "stable, neutral instrument of the individual will" (p. 42) are ruptured as she exposes that they are premised on the assumption that:

"The principle of self-determination requires a compliant body to secure a place in the fiercely competitive and dynamic socioeconomic realm. The idea of self-determination places tremendous pressure on individuals for their own social stations, economic situations, and relations with others" (Garland-Thompson, 1997, p. 43).

In accentuating the fallacy of self-determination by way of the extraordinary body, Garland-Thompson (1997) also notes the contradictory positions that this entails:

"On the one hand, the disabled figure is a sign for the body that refuses to be governed and cannot carry out the will to self-determination. On the other hand, the extraordinary body is nonconformity incarnate. In a sense then, the disabled figure has the potential to inspire with its irreverent individuality and to threaten with its violation of equality" (p. 44).

This duality reveals the basic instability of the subject position. Moreover, it demonstrates how disability can function as a site that exposes the permeability of boundaries, rendering subjectivity as at once something excessive and lacking, fragmented and appearing as a greater "vessel."

Echoing the claims Garland-Thompson makes about the mythological status of the American Ideal, Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (2001) note practices of self-maintenance of the body offer an "illusion of mastery that serves to establish a sense of bounded identity and autonomy" (p. 68). This applies to non-disabled and disabled people alike – it does not deny power relations but it does complicate the location that each person inhabits. As such, the subject's location as being socially and corporeally produced also situates disability within this understanding. Disability is characterized as an element of "embodied subjectivity: which is actively and continuously produced through social interactions with other body-subjects" (p. 63). Price and Shildrick moreover argue "the body is materialized *through* discourse – which we understand as both text and practice – and it becomes present to us not as a stable entity but as something that is always in process" (p. 63). In this sense, disability, as well as identity, can be seen as being produced through bodily *and* social interaction. Neither disability nor identity, however, can be claimed in a totalizing manner. That is to say, bounded identity and autonomy, as well as any singular form of disability, are not as straightforward as they are often initially assumed. Language, rights and interests, bodily interactions, and power relations collide in a messy constellation that is recognized as the self. Vital to this process is the interaction between individuals:

“The disruption of the notion of a unified self-present individual brings more clearly into focus the question of our relationships with others as they are enacted, not simply through social relations, but through the interactions of our bodies and their mutually constitutive effects on one another” (p. 63)

Paying attention to the processes of interaction that Price and Shildrick emphasize leads to a place in which identity can be questioned and its asymmetries made evident. Moreover, it opens up a space of uncertainty in which interdependence signifies a breaking down of simple dichotomies. Price and Shildrick (2001) attempt to represent this by way of drawing attention to their collaboration in writing, in which yielding singular ownership of the text “parallels the willingness to give up ownership of ‘my’ body” (p. 65). This should not imply that one disowns the experience of one’s body, but it does mean attending to the way one’s embodied subjectivity is produced in conjunction with others:

“Put very simply, as one of us changes, so does the other... The significance is not that we think there is anything extraordinary about our particular interaction, but that the coming together of anomalous and normative embodiment can stand for a limit case for all relationships between self and other” (p. 64).

New Directions

The notion of ethics suggested by Price and Shildrick is poignant with regards to Laser Eagles. If the process of translation is one marked by fragments, and if the production of identity and self-representation is construed in terms of a continual encounter with slippage, then an impossible imperative not to rush to impose meaning upon the other emerges. This is made clear in the responsibilities of the Laser Eagle trackers, who, when confronted someone who can barely speak and move, have to learn how to exist in a place of “not-knowingness.” This place, or space, is also one of interdependence, for it would be dangerous to suggest that responsibility is one-sided. Instead, it can be seen as an asymmetrical relation, in which bodies, minds, language, and paint, come together to produce new meanings. The mission statement of Laser Eagles, “We will bring people together to passionately reveal all that is in their hearts and to contribute their creativity and insight to the world” (Laser Eagles Art Guild, 2008), encapsulates the necessity of interdependence and suggests the creative and transformative potential that exists in paying attention to this dynamic.

Not only can attending to interdependence open up new ways of thinking about how disability is enacted in the world (what does it mean to live in conjunction with other bodies and minds), it provides inspiration to rethink current structures of interaction on a broader level. Unruly Salon presenter Tanya Titchkosky (2008) makes the salient point that “it is difficult to imagine how images of disability will ever stop signifying the normalcy of regarding disabled people as contingent, as maybes, as those people that are only partially included in work, leisure, and love.” As I have argued, one way to continue challenging these contingent roles is to look at how bodily and social interactions can disrupt normative discourses of disability. The Laser Eagles Art Guild does this by rebuking notions of disability and countering them with collaborative efforts of creation, in which there is a striving to acknowledge fully the contributions each individual makes. One of the tasks at hand is to make evident how spaces

similar to the one fostered by the Laser Eagles are connected to a more widespread re-imagining of the ways in which disability is understood.

In this respect, the Unruly Salon series provided, as disability studies scholar Catherine Frazee (2008) put it in her keynote address, a welcome “weaving together [of] threads that may make more apparent, the emergence of what some have called a ‘disability aesthetic.’” The array of individuals involved in the series – artists, scholars, activists, and the curious – were given the rare opportunity to come together on one stage to explore disability in some of its many facets, as well as celebrate the creative expression that stems from the experience of disability. Determining what a disability aesthetic would constitute is not an easy task, judging by the wide-ranging display of attitudes and ideas at the Salons. Thus, one question that needs addressing is how interdependence fits into this project, not only on the level of individual relationships, but also in terms of the social, cultural and political dimensions that take into account how emergent forms of knowledge are constituted and the domains in which they circulate. This also brings into focus the sensitivities concerning translation and the manners in which creative expressions of disability are engendered and interact with one another, within and between the academic world, arts communities, and beyond. As such, the Unruly Salons represented an important step in reaching out and bringing different bodies and minds together to facilitate new relationships and collaborations. More importantly, they signaled the necessity to keep moving together into the spaces of not-knowingness that make possible new ways of imagining disability.

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