

The Incurrigibles:

Perspectives on Disability Visual Arts in the 20th and 21st Centuries

Beautiful Progress to Somewhere?

Amanda Cachia

In 2011, the deaf artist and scholar Joseph Grigely wrote an excellent and influential essay, entitled 'Beautiful Progress to Nowhere,' which contributed towards an extensive collection of commissioned texts compiled and edited by Aaron Williamson for the journal, *Parallel Lines*. The online journal was facilitated and hosted by the Serpentine Gallery in London and funded by Arts Council England.¹ In the text, Grigely talked of how *'there are no easy answers about disability, and no easy answers for Disabled artists. We make progress where we can, even beautiful progress to nowhere, straight into a wall.'*² Grigely was making reference to a work by artist Stephen Lapthisophon, which formed part of his solo show at Gallery 400 at the University of Illinois in 2002, entitled 'Within Reasonable Accommodation.'³

Lapthisophon had created a bright green-coloured wheelchair ramp, leaned up against a wall, and Grigely used this as an analogy and metaphor for the ambiguous state of the disability legislation around the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, and the continued obstacles (or walls) faced by artists in securing *'reasonable accommodation'*.

I use Grigely's essay to turn his complex statement into a question – has Disability Arts, indeed, made beautiful progress to nowhere, certainly since Grigely wrote his essay, but also more broadly in the 20th and 21st centuries? The word constraints of this essay mean that I



won't be able to explore this question as fully as I might hope, but I would like to offer some reflections and ideas regarding my experiences with *'international'* Disability Arts in the past five years. Much of my thinking wholeheartedly agrees with many of the points that Grigely makes about the many roadblocks that Disabled artists and disability politics continue to face, although I would like to suggest that this *'nowhere'* might be shifted, albeit subtly, towards *'somewhere'*, concluding with a question mark, to indicate that this is an open-ended, yet contentious conversation.

As an Australian woman living and working in California, USA, who identifies as physically Disabled according to the Social Model of Disability, I am often asked for my opinion on the state of Disability Arts in various countries,

above: Stephen Lapthisophon, *Ramp*, Painted wood, 61 x 10 x 91.5cm, 2002. Photograph Stephen Lapthisophon

specifically that of Australia, Canada, the UK, and the USA (indeed, I cannot speak of the state of Disability Arts outside of these places owing to my limited contact). My response to this question typically suggests that I feel that public arts funding towards disability-based creative initiatives in both the UK, Canada and Australia is quite robust, with the UK at the forefront and as the clear leader in this regard. One thinks of organisations such as Shape Arts in London, DASH in Shrewsbury, Arts Access Australia as Australia's peak body for the arts (along with many other smaller disability-arts organisations throughout its various states), and Tangled Art + Disability based in Toronto as the Canadian counterpart. On the other hand, the USA tends to excel at offering rigorous academic opportunities in disability studies (although not strictly Disability Arts), and the Society for Disability Studies is very active at staging annual conferences and publishing its peer-reviewed journal, *Disability Studies Quarterly*.

Whilst there are few departments dedicated wholly to disability studies in various universities and colleges (Ohio State University and University at Buffalo are some examples), disability studies invariably pops up as a minor subject, housed within other humanities-based academic departments.⁴

My response to this question only truly scratches the surface of the representation, growth and development of 'Disability Arts', for it also arguably encompasses a very narrow definition of what it might come to mean. For example, another facet might consist of the proliferation of Disabled models who are now achieving great national and international

success on the world stage and are working to challenge normative and deeply ingrained aesthetic ideals, such as Madeline Stuart, Nyle DiMarco, and Rebekah Marine, who embody Down's Syndrome, deafness and amputee form in that order. In other words, 'Disability Art' has proliferated across the globe in ways beyond the purely visual, where its representation can be experienced in all art forms including theatre, dance, music, architecture, new media, poetry, curatorial studies, and creative writing.

Pedagogically, a number of scholars have also developed handbooks, offering templates for how to teach Disability Arts in the classroom, such as Petra Kuppers and Alice Fox and Hannah Macpherson.⁵ Conferences and symposia on 'Disability Arts' have also blossomed, including the current 2016 'Crippling the Arts' conference that recently took place in Toronto thanks to Tangled Art + Disability, not to mention DASH's own 'Awkward Bastards' held at mac Birmingham in 2015. Disability Arts festivals are also flourishing: DaDaFest in Liverpool continues to remain strong, while the brand new US counterpart, DisArt, based in Grand Rapids, Michigan is leading the charge for a new quality and branding of experience for visitors to engage in the vibrancy that is Disability Arts, officially launched in 2015 and securing significant national arts funding through the National Endowment for the Arts.

The world of athleticism and sports has also launched substantial artistic and funding opportunities for 'Disability Arts', such as the *Unlimited* programming that stemmed from the

Olympics and Paralympics in London in 2012, and the PanAm and ParaPanAm Games in Toronto in 2015.

'Disability Arts' also encompasses politics and activism around access, and accommodation. Myself, along with several self-identifying Disabled colleagues at institutions like the University of California Berkeley, including Georgina Kleege, an independent artist Carmen Papalia, are especially interested in issues of 'creative access', where we aim to disseminate and illustrate evolving radical and transgressive ideas in curatorial design for how museum and gallery workers might become competent in building and delivering accessible multi-media practices in museums. We consider innovation in curatorial practice that advances the goal of increasing access to exhibitions by people with sensory, cognitive and physical disabilities. Considering accessible design principles for a wide-range of bodies is critical for the future direction of *all* modalities of design.

For my own part, in terms of attempting to make a contribution towards 'Disability Arts', I am currently working on my PhD dissertation, and my research and scholarship is broadly based at the intersection of contemporary art, the politics of space, and disability studies, where I seek to explore how various Disabled artists and their corresponding audience members engage with the architectures of public space, ranging from the museum to the street; issues that have never before been addressed in art history and criticism. By focusing specifically on aspects of performance, vision and sound, exhibition design, socially engaged, discursive art

practice and everyday urban architectures through the work of contemporary Disabled artists, I aim to build a new discourse for the phenomenology of the Disabled spectator. Much of my methodological research over the past few years has also revolved around my curatorial projects with Disabled artists based in Canada and the USA.

The themes and ideas that developed in my exhibitions have also been the source of my overall scholarly writing and thinking, including any outcomes evaluated through visitor attendance and feedback.⁶

Despite all this '*somewhere*' – progress that is occurring – which suggests that the voice of disability and Disabled artists is becoming much louder, more prolific and noticeable than several decades ago, many of us in disability communities still face ongoing 'walls' or barriers within our daily lives. The world was not built for Disabled people, and this fact continues to remain true. We also wrestle with challenging terms and definitions, and this is especially wrapped up with the d-word itself ('d' for 'disability'): which persistently presents a ghettoising conundrum for artists and arts workers alike, who often have to carefully and strategically consider the vicissitudes of self-identification in relation to their complex embodiment, or even their politics, no matter how earnest and strong.⁷

This past winter, 2016, New York-based artist and wheelchair user Park McArthur staged her first solo exhibition in London entitled *Poly*, at the Chisenhale Gallery⁸. McArthur's installation explored '*what it is to bear, to accommodate and to cushion...and the inseparable material*



left: Park McArthur, heaters that were included in *Poly*, 2016, Chisenhale Gallery, London, (not an official artwork, but an accommodation).

*relations of art to life.*⁹ One unofficial aspect of the exhibition was a series of welcoming red heaters that lay equally spread out around the perimeter of the rectangular box-shaped room.

The heaters were ordered before the installation in order to support the comfort of the artist during her time in the gallery – indeed, they functioned as a subtle, if ambiguous, accommodation, as visitors often easily confused the heaters for actual works of art. If the heaters had not been in the space, then it would not have been possible for the artist to be there on a daily basis as she prepared her show, owing to the unsuitable temperature conditions of the space. The artist had made the decision to keep the heaters as part of her overall installation in order to leave this trace of her individuated existence in the space, but also to keep the space warm for the comfort of her visitors. The heaters act as a tangible accommodation for McArthur's body and that of the audience, and also reveal much about the gallery's intangible engagement with care, demonstrating how the social and atmospheric space of the gallery created its own aesthetic objects through need and desire, where context and effect inform one another. Indeed, through the inclusion of these objects, McArthur provokes us to consider questions around the boundaries between accommodation and art – when is an accommodation an art, and can and is art accommodating?

McArthur's 2016 heaters might also work as a companion to Lapthisophon's 2002 ramp – although rather than an unaccommodating ramp leading to nowhere, in McArthur's show the heaters invite us to share in a space

together, embracing accommodation to its utmost potential. These heaters remind us that all our bodies are mapped onto space, even if some of those bodies require more, or different, accommodation than others. McArthur's show is significant for it might act as an antithesis to 'nowhere' or walls that shut everything down. Instead, it suggests an opening that spans physical, conceptual and dialogic qualities, which also points to how Disability Arts might be 'somewhere' after all.

- 1 For more information, see www.parallellinesjournal.com Accessed April 26, 2016
- 2 www.parallellinesjournal.com/article-beautiful-progress-nowhere.html – Accessed April 26, 2016
- 3 For more information on the exhibition, visit <http://gallery400.uic.edu/exhibitions/with-reasonable-accommodation> – Accessed June 1, 2016
- 4 For a full listing, see <http://disabilitystudies.syr.edu/programs-list/> Accessed April 29, 2016
- 5 For more information, see Petra Kupperts, *Studying Disability Arts and Culture: An Introduction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), and Alice Fox and Hannah Macpherson, *Inclusive Arts Practice and Research: A Critical Manifesto* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015).
- 6 For more information on some of my projects, visit <http://fleshoftheworld.ca/> <http://exhibits.haverford.edu/whatcanabodydo/>, <http://cjds.uwaterloo.ca/index.php/cjds/issue/view/7/showToc>
- 7 For more information on the ghettoisation of disability, see Aaron Williamson's essay, 'In the Ghetto? A Polemic in Place of an Editorial' in *Parallel Lines* journal, <http://www.parallellinesjournal.com/article-in-the-ghetto.html> Accessed April 26, 2016
- 8 For more information on this exhibition, visit <http://www.chisenhale.org.uk/archive/exhibitions/index.php?id=177> – Accessed June 1, 2016
- 9 <http://www.chisenhale.org.uk/archive/exhibitions/index.php?id=177> – Accessed April 26, 2016