

# Unleashed and Unruly:

## Staking Our Claim to Place, Space and Culture

*Presented to the Unruly Salon, profiling disability performance and scholarship.*

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Let me begin by adding my words of appreciation and congratulation to all who have contributed their ideas, creativity and labours to the Unruly Salon -- to Leslie Roman and Geoff McMurchy and all of their team -- the excitement of this inaugural moment is palpable, even from a distance of 4500 km. east!

Congratulations as well to UBC's President Toope and to Tara Fenwick and her colleagues in the Department of Educational Studies, as well as to Principal Taubeneck and the faculty of Green College for their obvious support of this initiative and for the leap of faith that it represents.

Thanks to the website for Green College I have a picture of this moment consisting not only of the images that fill the videoconference screen in front of me, but of a larger scene as well. I can imagine you in your intimate but "spectacular setting overlooking the Strait of Georgia and the North Shore mountains", and from my vantage point in quarters that harmonize a little too well with the bleak midwinter offerings of downtown Toronto – to say that I feel pangs of longing would be a colossal understatement.

These longings aside, I am struck by the description of Green College as a community of scholars committed to expanding their understanding of the world, whose intellectual pursuits reach across academic boundaries and into the larger, global community.

This, then, is the making of a *perfect storm* – a convergence of forces generating effects of untold intensity. For when a thoughtful and engaged audience, a roll-up-your sleeves kind of audience, a discerning, **working** audience, meets with artists who are uncorked and unruly, artists who make no apologies and who take no prisoners, artists who have something utterly new yet profoundly timeless to say, the encounter will spiral outward in great waves of paradigm-shifting consequence.

What I'm describing here is not something that happens on stage. It's something that happens in the spaces all around the stage, in the blurring of lines between performer and audience, in the chemistry of curatorial and critical attention, in what each of us will say and do at intermission, over a drink tonight, at the breakfast table tomorrow, at the office on Monday morning. It's all about what we say in our blogs and at our bridge clubs. The cyclone of disability arts is generated by *buzz*. In the words of Virginia Woolf, great

“masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice”<sup>1</sup>.

This Unruly Salon both celebrates and generates the confident claiming of place, space and culture by a people who will no longer be colonized, sidelined or silenced. At the same time, this Unruly Salon ordains and inducts each of us to pay attention, to make connections, to respond -- in short to *contribute* to the opening and unfolding of this cultural space.

In short, Salon audience, please **unfasten** your seatbelts. You – we – are about to create a masterpiece. There will be turbulence and majesty, encounters with the profane and the divine, illuminations that both affirm and unsettle. There will be nervous laughter, gut wrenching howls, pin-drop silence and riotous enthusiasm. There will be bafflement, resonance and revelation. **And you will be changed.** For disabled artists are not simply *participating* in the Canadian cultural domain – they are *creating* it, shaping it, stretching it beyond its tidy established edges.

The artists in this Salon, in a certain sense, have done their piece. Bonnie has directed her film. Geoff has choreographed his piece. I have written my text. Likewise, for the next six Salons. The work has been crafted and rehearsed. So what remains? What exactly is this larger task, the work of creating this new masterpiece?

I shall offer three suggestions. The work of excavation. The work of weaving. And the work of coming to pride. Briefly, I offer a few reflections about each.

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<sup>1</sup> Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Harvest Books, Fort Washington, PA (1989). Chapter 4.

## **EXCAVATION**

**N**ot all of Disability Art is explicitly *about* the disability experience. But all of it, I would suggest, *springs from* disability experience, and to be fully appreciated, must be seen and heard with all of its historic and biographical resonances. This is what I mean by the work of excavation.

Allow me to explain by drawing from examples in the larger cultural domain. On December 23<sup>rd</sup> of last year, our nation stopped in the tracks of its seasonal excesses, and paused to contemplate a great cultural figure. We had lost Oscar Peterson. We stopped to honour the man and the legacy, remembering not only his prodigious musical powers, but equally the deep cultural history invoked by his name – the aspirations of immigration, the invisible lives of train porters, the racist policies of hotels and nightclubs.<sup>2</sup>

So, similarly, we said farewell last year to Norval Morrisseau, Eastern Woodlands Ojibway artist, remembering not only his powerful expressive canvases, but also the rising up of Aboriginal consciousness in Canada, pushing back against an era of horrific cultural annihilation, of residential schools and the suppression of languages and ritual practices that so deeply damaged First Nations culture.<sup>3</sup>

And likewise the final respects we paid this year to the memory of Doris Anderson were infused with respect and affinity for brazen women who led the great second wave of feminism in Canada, standing up to patriarchy, to post-war domestication of women, to unequal pay, harassment and discrimination.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For a compelling reflection upon Peterson's life in its historical and ethnoracial context, see remarks by Her Excellency the Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean, on the occasion of the Oscar Peterson Memorial Concert (Toronto, Saturday, January 12, 2008). Available: <http://www.gg.ca/media/doc.asp?lang=e&DocID=5259>

<sup>3</sup> For a tribute to Morrisseau's place in Aboriginal Canadian history and culture, see statement by Assembly of First Nations National Chief Phil Fontaine (Ottawa, December 4, 2007). Available: <http://www.afn.ca/article.asp?id=3977>

<sup>4</sup> See, for example Michelle Landsberg's description of Anderson as “one of the key figures in Canada's feminist history”, in “Doris Anderson, the mother of us all”. Landsberg, M. Chatelaine. Toronto: May 2007. Vol. 80, Iss. 5; p.17.

**A**rt is far more than a way of decorating our world; it is a way of knowing it. As Margaret Atwood has written, “the arts... are not a frill. They are the heart of the matter, because they are about our hearts, and our [progress in the material world] is generated by our emotions, not by our minds. A society without the arts would have broken its mirror and cut out its heart”<sup>5</sup>.

And so, in our encounters with the Art of Disability, we are called upon to know the heart of the matter, to hold up the mirror, hear the overtones. What social histories are embedded in the installations of Persimmon Blackbridge? What struggles and exclusions backstage the croonings of Joe Coughlin? What are the defining contours of the universe that Ryan Knighton narrates? Where have our artists come from? What have they endured? What have they survived? These histories, once excavated, enrich every experience of disability art.

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<sup>5</sup> Atwood, Margaret. "The art of the matter", excerpted from the 2004 Kesterton Lecture. *Globe and Mail*, 24 January 2004. A19.

## WEAVING

**O**ur second task, as a working and engaged Disability Arts audience, involves weaving together the threads that may make more apparent, the emergence of what some have called a Disability Aesthetic.

I cannot spell out for you – at least not yet – what I mean when I invoke the notion of a Disability Aesthetic, but let's be having that conversation. A Canadian Disability Arts canon has emerged in recent years and I believe it is incumbent upon us to begin the task of describing its principal features. What are the artistic and aesthetic dialogues, the points of contact between Tania Willard's prints and Bonnie Sherr-Klein's documentary films? In what way does Geoff McMurchy's choreography connect with David Roche's storytelling, or Victoria Maxwell's dramaturgy? Is there some shared idiom or logic?

I have only the most preliminary of thoughts here, but in the spirit of creative collaboration, let me suggest that the canon is expressed at least in part by the **authenticity and intentionality** of voices connected to experience – unsentimental, uncompromising and unflinching voices of artists who work *with* and not *in spite of* disability.

To this I would add the markers of **fullness and amplitude**, characteristics of work produced by artists who assemble a wholeness of self and context, who embody disability and embrace its ways and means.

Thirdly, I would feature the **transformative** capacity of Disability Art - work that invariably moves outward from the particularity of disability experience toward that which is universally human. What is most distinct and important here, I would suggest, is that this transformative work does not claim, sweetly and imploringly, that we *are just like you*, but rather is work that knows, in some deep and sustaining way, that **you are just like us**.

As well, I would recognize the spirit of this work's own **audacity**, its swaggering savvy, its determination to speak back to power, to disrupt comfortable narratives, to confront and reshape conventional accounts of grace, beauty, lyricism, strength, rhythm and form.

It's just a mere stub of a list, and for present purposes it ends here. But it is a work in progress, and I welcome and eagerly await the contributions of Salon weavers in the weeks ahead.

## **COMING TO PRIDE**

**F**inally, the shared project and the great payback of this masterpiece – coming to pride.

We don't get anywhere without pride. We don't get past the averted stares, the whispered judgments, the shabby offerings, the sorry excuses – without pride.

Before we can begin to push back against injustice and indignity, before we can rise up from the swirl of rage and despair, before we can speak back to a script that casts us as tragic victims and bitter villains, we must have pride.

Pride is where the journey of emancipation begins.

Pride for who we are. It is a deeply personal experience, this casting off of shroud and echo. Yet coming to pride is a delicate alchemy that can only take root in the fertile ground of community. It is our connection to each other that transforms stigma to grace, personal burden to collective struggle, shame to honour.

We know that art has both intrinsic and instrumental worth, that it has value both in and of itself and also as a means to interpret, to understand, to share, to repair. Art brings us together. Good art is both the product and the sustenance of human imagination. And so Art brings us together in ways that invoke moral imagination, summoning us to justice, dignity and all of the great quests of human progress. It is perhaps only through art and its activation of imagination, that we can both conceive of, and be moved resolutely toward visions of equality and justice.

That is how we come to pride, together.

And so, with pride, I offer a toast to the Unruly Salon and its unruly actors and protagonists; to our history and resistance; to our creativity and choices; to our place, space and culture.