Blind Field Shuttle

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Carmen Papalia is a non-visual artist whose social practice includes engaging participants in exercising their other-than-visual senses. *Blind Field Shuttle*, for example, is an eyes-closed walking tour in which the artist leads up to forty people on a ramble through natural or urban settings. Participants are coached, and then arranged in a line, their right hand on the shoulder of the person in front of them. Papalia joins the front of the human chain and guides us with his walking stick and voice: "rough pavement coming up; feel the incline as you transition from the sidewalk to the road; tree on the left; low barrier ahead;" and so on.

I was a photographer for a walk Papalia conducted in Kelowna last summer (2016) as part of the University of British Columbia Okanagan campus' Indigenous Summer Intensive. I witnessed with alarm as he led more than two dozen adults and a few teens onto a pier. When he reached the end of the dock and realized that it was not a bridge, he calmly explained the situation, turned and doubled the line back on the narrow passage. No one panicked. No one fell into the lake. Most surprisingly, I didn't see anyone open their eyes.

The year before, I went on a *Blind Field Shuttle* walk in and around Ottawa City Hall. The experience increased my awareness of the scent and sound environments, the unevenness of the ground, and change in wind, sunlight and heat than I would if my eyes were open. We navigate most of our day unconsciously. Our bodies perform routine with little awareness. By voluntarily turning off vision, and surrendering individual agency for a shared trust, *Blind Field Shuttle* engenders an hour and a half of heightened consciousness: of our bodies, surroundings, and most importantly, our interrelationships.

At first, you struggle against instinct. I reverse blinked at least a half dozen times in the first two minutes. But I soon learned to trust the person ahead of me—or at least submit to their lead—and, feeling responsible for the person behind me, I eased into my role in the collective challenge. Part of the thrill of this work is the suspension of autonomy, submitting to being part of an interdependent organism.

Blind Field Shuttle is art in that we are guided into a familiar world through an artist's unique subjectivity. Papalia defamiliarizes the routine so that we might better appreciate its nuances and the felt architecture of our senses and sensibilities. Like much art, it exaggerates and condenses a representation of life. But *Blind Field Shuttle* is also social practice art in that it emphasizes experience over objects, and is more a form of life rather than just its representation. And it is utopic in that it models ideal interrelations.

Clearly, Carmen Paplia wants us to taste the world as he does. We volunteer to momentarily repress our dominant sense so that we can experience our environment as a non-visual space. But we also get a hint of Carmen's social subjectivity, not only his experience as a person who is not seeing, but as a person seen as "blind." I felt anxiety and peril when I turned off sight, but I also felt excitement and growing competency. Fear lessened a little by the middle of the walk. But the sense of being on display, and the stress of not knowing how I was being seen or unseen never expired.

Blind Field Shuttle is a reversal. Instead of a sight-dominant person leading a non-visual learner, this participatory performance has a non-visual learner guiding the sight-privileged. We not only get a faint sense of what his life might be like, we also feel Papalia's greater authority in this territory. By performing competency, he demonstrates his abilities, his agency ahead of his needs. But he also performs, and has us perform, his preferred means of satisfying his needs.

Non-Visual Artist

Carmen describes himself as a non-visual learner. The phrase asks us to consider the senses he does employ rather than the one he does not. It calls attention to his abilities. Papalia is critical of institutions that follow a rehabilitation model, one that has disabled persons strive to pass for 'normal' while clearly destined to fall short. This way of thinking is designed, in part, to make disabilities and the disabled less visible, less disturbing, less of a bother to the able-bodied. But when Papalia replaces his cane with a megaphone, as he does in *White Cane Amplified* (2015), or with a marching band *Mobility Device* (2013), he goes in the opposite direction; he increases the spectacle, he hyperbolizes difference. Is it possible to witness *Blind Field Shuttle* and not have "the blind leading the blind," spring to mind? What's his game beyond ironic art fun?

In a rather subtle and yet profound way, Carmen Papalia displays both his competency and his needs. That he can navigate his city and travel to others, make art and a living without sight—that he can lead a group of eyes-closed participants across busy streets, through a park, onto a dock and back without the loss of life or dignity is a marvel. But what takes this work far beyond novelty is how he shows that what disables us most is not the loss of a sense but the reduction in humanity that too often accompanies physical and mental difference.

Blind Field Shuttle is a generous gift to the sight privileged. We learn how ocular-dominance reduces the meanings and pleasures offered by our other senses. But more importantly, the work demonstrates how an egocentric, individualistic social ideology can separate us from intimate, interdependent community. Papalia shows without saying that we all have limitations that require help from others. Some have greater needs; others have a greater ability to assist. There is a delicate dance in this interdependent relation. How do we ask for help while maintaining dignity? So many people withdrawal from care because requesting it can be humiliating, debilitating.

In all his works, Carmen Papalia shows us what he needs, what we all need: to be assisted according to our changing individual needs, to be in a community of mutual care. Critical care is a heightened sense of empathy that anticipates need rather than waits for a request.

I had read about *Blind Field Shuttle,* saw the photographs, and thought I had a good sense of what it was. You can imagine what the experience is like, but you can know it without participating. And you can't participate without suspending your agency to become a participating subject. This is the difference, I suppose, between helping a blind man cross the street and being in relationship with another person who would like to go for a walk with you.

Open Access

Carmen and I have given talks together at the Ottawa Art Gallery. At the Dunlop Art Gallery, and at the University of Alberta, we recently held a public conversations. Our friendship began at a symposium he co-hosted with Gallery Gachet (2015). [http://gachet.org/exhibitions/the-new-access-consortium-presents-a-collective-audit-of-the-vancouver-art-gallery/]
His talk about his "Open Access" project ideas resonated with me concerning my interest in Indigenous possibilities and impossibilities in art galleries and museums still haunted by their colonial imaginaries and desires.

For the last few years, Carmen has been developing, testing, and promoting five tenants for "Open Access" which are premised on his experience of being disabled less by his physical limitations than by those imposed upon him by institutions dominated by an ocular-centric regime. This experience and insight led him to band with fellow disenfranchised allies who, due to a range of physical and mental differences from the normalized range thought to compose the 'publics' of these spaces, also felt similarly unacceptable to these spaces.

However, rather than simply advocate for physical inclusion. Carmen and his crew did an informal inventory of the Vancouver Art Gallery, not looking for missing ramps, too many artificial scents, and other disabling devices, but for numerous other subtle—to the non-marginalized—disabling conditions. This includes, for example, the steep entrance fee, which filters the poor. Most rigorous and surprising, though, is their edit of a didactic panel about the work of Christos Dikeakos that focused on its whitewashing of Indigenous presence and colonization—features the audit saw as disabling to Indigenous visitors. That the group would be sensitive to this made me –as Metis—wonder about more intersections between the Indigenous and disability activism.

That the group would focus on Indigenous issues intrigued me. It suggested that there was something in their methodology that exceeded their informing conditions; that is, in looking for conditions that made them not want to be in that space, or be troubled by it, opened them to aesthetic, intellectual, emotional, and physical engagements that required a radical empathy that exceeded self interest.

And this is what moves my most about Carmen Papalia's work. He is not only advocating for greater access to public institutions by disabled persons, he is showing how these spaces and limit most of us. Importantly, his work implies that radical inclusion would alter many of the paradigms of these places. For example, creating access through audio descriptions of visual art so non-visual learners can "access" visual art is a thoughtful and generous idea—until you think about it, and it becomes strange. No audio description can create in a listener's mind an image remotely resembling a specific physical picture. If you are a visual learner and have a repertory of visual images and know what Impressionism and Monet are, you can get a pretty good sense of a Monet you haven't seen before through a word description. But it is going to be a pale and unreliable version. Now imagine your visuality ceased before you knew those pictures.

To get a sense of what Open Access might look like, Carmen offers *Eyes Closed* walking tours of museums and art galleries. A group meets at an art gallery. Carmen coaches them about what is ahead. We pair up. One person leads the other, whose eyes are closed, in a fifteen-minute audio tour of an exhibition. Then we switch roles. Rather than listen to a device with the same message for everyone, each tour is customized. There is also touch and friendship. Rather than reinforce the supremacy of sight and curatorial authority, the sensibilities and perceptions of the visitor and guide are centered.

Recently, Keavy Martin hosted Carmen and I at the University of Alberta. As part of our visit we went to a discussion group about Treaty Six and how acknowledgement of Treaty can be an active part of university life and scholarship. We recognized many affinities between Carmen's Open Access methodologies and Indigenous ways of being in territory. Indigenization and Open Access have in common the need to slow down. Colonial institutions prize efficiency. They work best with and for normalized bodies and minds. What Indigenous and disabled persons offer is an older and expanded sense of humanity. It's less in a hurry. Both privilege visiting. Both prioritize relations, not just between people but also with all the beings around us, and seek to experience the world through our knowing subjectivities more than through the social codes that shape our perceptions.

For the past four years I have been working with Keavy Martin, Dylan Robinson, Ashok Mathur, and Jonathan Dewar on a SSHRC-funded project called Creative Conciliations. In our various ways we have been looking at and making work about relations between Indigenous and Settler peoples following the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Much of our work has looked beyond the expected Indigenous to European-Settler relations, and toward the many other peoples who share these territories. The thinking is that we are more likely to find common ground among minoritized peoples, that we might be able to move toward tolerable futures when we listen to, learn and collaborate with people who are less invested in domination. I look forward to future collaborations with Carmen Papalia.

David Garneau 2017