Marginalized by Design

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Aesthetic distance dissolved into carnality on a humid summer afternoon at the Art Institute of Chicago. I was seized at first sight by an urge to press my lips to those full, slightly parted ones. And, once the security guard ambled out of sight, I did. Of course, I wanted to kiss the beautiful person represented by the sculpture, but—for my teen-aged self, chaste by introversion but eager by design—this cool intermediary would do. But it didn't. Knowing, and yet not fully feeling it until I tried it, the result of my Pygmalion performance was inevitable—erotic disappointment, a sense of bathetic absurdity, but also the excitement of breaking a rule.

Touch is the taboo of western-style museums. They are sites of discipline. They demand that individuals control themselves, particularly that we repress touch, taste, and smell to sharpen vision and imagination. School children are hushed and ushered through troves of beautiful and interesting things that demand to be caressed but cannot. Fingers itch to comprehend the treasures more thoroughly, but this way of knowing is denied. Here, children are guarded and trained to perfect themselves, to contain themselves, to mirror their vitrined companions. They are informed that their body secrets invisible oils that damage the artifacts. The lesson is that these special things need protection from people who unwittingly threaten their potential immortality with their imperfect, leaky bodies. The darker message is that some objects are more valued than most people, including them.

And there are other lessons. Western-style museums picture children as more or less classless, and then provide guidance into an ontological hierarchy that ranks according to learning preferences, ability to sustain certain attentions and suppress others. These sites render sensuous things into visual ones and coax kids to privilege their eyes over other sense organs. They are encouraged to exercise their minds rather than their bodies, to imagine and infer, and to defer rather than satisfy tactile learning. Those who do not conform or confirm this orientation find the museum or art gallery is not for them.

This dominant but by no means universal preference is increasingly challenged by those made peripheral by this imaginary—the 'disabled,' the Indigenous, and others who are marginalized by design.

Carmen Papalia is blind—though he prefers "non-visual learner." In *White Cane Amplified* (2015 16:47 min.), a lean, dapper young man in 1940s-style fedora and vest (the artist) cautiously walks down a street. Caneless, but armed with a megaphone, he narrates his passage and presence: "Can you see me? I can't see you." Because a white cane renders him visible as blind but invisible as Carmen, the artist replaces it with a megaphone which, along with his striking clothes, makes him a site to (re)consider. He is a disruptive subject and subjectivity made tangible. Ditching the cane and stereotype means that he is less able—if, that is, he is understood as being alone.

White Cane Amplified is as much about expanding the possibilities of masculinity as it is about social abling and disabling. While the video offers a glimpse into Papalia's ubiquitous peril, the

artist does not portray himself as the heroic blind man. Instead, he amplifies his anxiety and vulnerability. The man is adventurous but in need of company. He requires active empathetic engagement if he is to survive. The work has me think about how western culture's valorizing of self-reliance (gendered masculine) not only marginalizes those who need help, which is all of us, but it also devalues (coded) feminine and Indigenous modes of social cohesion. Papalia's performance reminds us that we share a social body. By stepping out of his proscribed role and safety, he requires himself and all around to continuously negotiate his actual being rather than simply read and perform type. It is this physical discourse that produces our shared humanity. This disabled man, by unmanning, by trading competent isolation for vulnerable interdependence, enables community.

Carmen Papalia explains that is not just the street and stereotypes that make his life challenging, museums also disable him: "If I…experience limited access to a museum exhibition because there are few opportunities for me to engage…in a way that is not visual, it is the institution, in its failure to accommodate me as a non-visual learner, that disables me as a museum visitor."[i] In addition to being an artist, Papalia is a curator of alternate experiences who raises awareness about debilitating design by leading participants on tours of museums—including the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney, Guggenheim, Victoria & Albert Museum, the Vancouver Art Gallery, and many others—with their eyes closed. "I design experiences that invite those involved to expand their perceptual mobility and claim access to public and institutional spaces…. As an open sourcing of my own embodiment, my work makes visible the opportunities for learning and knowing that come available through the non-visual senses. It's a chance to unlearn looking and to help acknowledge, map and name entire unseen bodies of knowledge."

On Nov. 20-22, 2015, in partnership with Gallery Gachet and the Contemporary Art Gallery (Vancouver), Papalia curated an exhibition, *The New Access Consortium Presents: A Collective Audit of the Vancouver Art Gallery*; hosted a symposium, *For a New Accessibility*; and a series of workshops and related events. (Among the speakers was Amanda Cachia, whose brilliant curatorial work is reviewed in this issue). What I witnessed during these three days renewed my faith in the power of art to build and bridge communities, and to subtly reshape the world.

While Papalia propelled these events, the discourse emerged from an existing community, the Gachet artists. Gallery Gachet is a storefront art gallery in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Like other artist-run centres they facilitate exhibitions, artist talks, workshops, symposia, residencies, and community art programming. They also host performance art, poetry readings, even comedy nights. However, a survey of recent exhibition titles indicates a unique focus: *Mad Cartographies: Wilderness of the Soul and Mad Pride; Un Quiet Bodies;* and *Madness and Mobility: the Art of Inclusion*. Named after Vincent Van Gogh's last doctor, Gachet is dedicated, "through artistic means…to demystify and challenge issues related to mental health and social marginalization in order to educate the public and promote social and economic justice." The collective supports "people who have experienced marginalization [to] feel fully supported in their struggle for a creative life and career, including access to adequate housing, studio space and economic security."

It is easy to be disheartened by a splitting and drifting art world: art as high stakes conceptual and novelty commodities heading one way and art as state-sponsored social work going the

other. But what I found at Gachet was not (only) a social program but a self-reflective, intellectually and aesthetically rigorous group of people who take art seriously—so their slogan reads—"as a means for survival." For 23 years they have, with little art world recognition, been developing artists, curatorial theory and practice, community and administrative strategies whose lessons could transform mainstream institutions beyond capital and colonial agendas.

At the center of the exhibition (Nov. 8-Dec. 13, 2015) are art works generated by Papalia and The New Access Consortium of youth and artists from the Gachet community following their assessment of the Vancouver Art Gallery for accessibility. Some of the responses articulate specific dissatisfactions and their practical remedies: more audio and other aids, scent-free spaces, tolerance for non-typical behaviour, more chairs, free entrance, collect work by living disabled artists, etc. Other works critique hegemonic curatorial and artistic practices. Particularly effective is the reproduction of a text panel that accompanies a series of Christos Dikeakos photos at the VAG. The Consortium offers a biting and insightful red pencil edit that demonstrates how even art and texts intended as sensitive to First Nations people and concerns can continue colonial habits, especially if they do not engage Indigenous curators and knowledge keepers. The instructive deconstruction examines the institutional designs that discourage access not only to disabled people but to anyone incomprehensible or incidental to its imaginary.

A few works transcend complaint and remedy to become remarkable aesthetic experiences as well as critical engagements with the art gallery. In the first few minutes of her video "Bruha: Chou" (2015 19:58 min.), aly dela cruz yip, a small, slight woman lies on a blanket. She laughs, sighs, and engages in a strange shaking fit but also seemingly purposeful exercises. She acts as if she is in her bedroom rather than an Emily Carr exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery. It takes a few minutes before she takes an interest in the paintings. She presses her ear close to Carr's iconic "Big Raven" (1931) as if to listen; then makes bird sounds. She runs bare-footed, circling the one of the walls at a dangerous speed. She repeatedly bobs under and up each side of a red ribbon stretched between two brass stanchions. Later, in the main lobby, she strips out of her street clothes and puts on a white outfit, wig and make-up, then drags herself along the gallery floor, and rolls down the main marble stairs, among other surprising actions.

It is a remarkable and disconcerting performance. Yip seems at once confident and alienated. She interacts with the space with pleasure and curiosity, but in conventionally inappropriate ways. Her interests are not aligned with those of the space she temporarily occupies. She is curious about the raven but indifferent to the Carr aura. She appears untrained and uninterested in gallery protocol and values. Unlike most art performances in museums and mainstream galleries, this was not staged for an audience (apart from the camera). It did not seem tamed. I felt like a witness to a near-spontaneous response of a body and temperament to an unwelcome space. At the same time, her actions were not random, but seemed informed by an/other, non-western (clowning?) discipline. Her playful yet serious protocol breaches made me aware of how conditioned we are in these spaces, and how some uses, behaviours, and bodies are discouraged.

Western-style museums collect, sterilize, and hoard our most beautiful and interesting human-made objects. Like cryogenic bodies, they are preserved in the hopes that future generations will better know what to do with them. This behavior expresses a desire for immortality by proxy, but also a basic distrust in persons living now. This is quite different from the Indigenous worldview

as I know it from conversations with elders and knowledge keepers mostly on the Plains. For Indigenous people, human-made things are forms of embodied knowledge awakened by touch and talk. Information resides in the object and the person who made it. The handmade thing and its maker are both knowledge carriers. The object carries the secrets of its making, and the keeper carries the stories, the object's meanings. Knowledge is passed through and from object to object—for example, through and from drum to drum—but also through and from each master maker to apprentice. But the thing, the drum, is never more important than a person, and neither are more important that the knowledge, which passes through but exceeds them. They are all members of a circuit of making, meaning, and being. To tease out anyone—to isolate the drum in a glass cabinet, or keep the person and story from the museum and the children, or the drum from the hands of the player or next maker, is an absurd violence—a colonial thing—from an Indigenous point of view. Museum things are once-were-belongings defined by their use. To use them is to bring them, and their culture, to life. If the object gets damaged through use, it can be replaced by its next incarnation or interpretation.

What artists and curators are saying, making, and doing at Gachet and elsewhere allies well with Indigenous thinking and doing. Here are creative antidotes to societies that have gone antisocial.

There is, in fact, at the Art Institute of Chicago, a gallery populated by bronze and marble portrait busts, and you are encouraged to touch them. A thin coat of wax protects them from damaging secretions. To my shame, I shied from entering the Elizabeth Morse Touch Gallery, thinking it was only for non-visual learners. Or, perhaps, I was anxious about sharing a space and experience with people I thought were not like me, afraid of what I would learn.

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[i] Carmen Papalia. "A New Model for Access in the Museum." Disability Studies Quarterly. Vol. 33, #3 (2013). http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/3757/3280 Accessed Dec. 20, 2015.