

CANADIAN JOURNAL OF

Disability Studies

Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association · Association Canadienne des Études sur l'Incapacité

Canadian Journal of Disability Studies

**Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association
Association canadienne d'études sur le handicap**

Hosted by The University of Waterloo

www.cjds.uwaterloo.ca

Editorial Introduction to VIBE Special Issue

Ash McAskill, Kim Sawchuk and Samuel Thulin (co-editors)

This special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* is a result of the activity surrounding VIBE: Challenging ableism and audism through the arts, a 3-day international symposium exploring the existing and potential contributions of the Deaf/disability arts to aesthetic innovations, research-creation and cultural change in attitudes towards the capacities of the Deaf/disabled. The symposium, which took place at Concordia University from November 30 - December 2, 2018, brought together Deaf/disabled academics, emerging scholars, post-doctoral researchers, activists, artists, and students – and their allies – for vibrant exchanges on the relationship between disability arts research and disability arts practice.

VIBE was hosted by the Critical Disability Studies Working Group (CDSWG), who are a part of Concordia's Milieux: Institute for Arts, Culture and Technology in Montreal. Founded in 2014, the CDSWG is an “interdisciplinary team of scholars and creators that engage in an ongoing transformation of the disability studies paradigm” (CDSWG). CDSWG is rooted primarily in *critical* disability studies, which is a model that moves away from reducing disability to an “impairment” by opening up “the complex interconnection between medicine, society and bodies” (CDSWG). In addition, VIBE highlighted the work of Québec-based Deaf and disability arts groups. Some featured in this journal alone— Méliissa Desjardins, seeley quest, Théâtre Aphasique, Les Productions des pieds des mains, Hodan Youssouf, Véro Leduc, Pamela Witcher, Daz Saunders, Joe Jack et John, Samuel Thulin (one of the co-editors), Aimee Louw, Jonathan Sterne, Laurence Parent, and Paul Tshuma. VIBE challenged the normative values of a culture that is steeped in what disability rights activists call “able-ism” or in French “capacitisme.” Able-ism refers to the many subtle forms that contribute to systemic discrimination based on dis/ability (Ferrier). VIBE addressed the question: How can creative actions and processes indicate “the ways that art and design can help us imagine new possibilities for society...imagine completely new ways of interacting with each other and our environments” (Ware, 2014, para 2)?

Description of the Event

The VIBE symposium was a multifaceted event, featuring 2 keynote presentations, 8 panels, a plenary performative conversation, an exhibition of creative works, and VIBE art night - an evening of performances including theatre, Deaf music, poetry, video screenings, and performance art. In addition to this flurry of activities, the VIBE symposium was preceded by a workshop series on accessibility and art-making, and opened in parallel with a 10 day art exhibition entitled *Vibrations*¹ (curated by Samuel Thulin, David Bobier, and Kim Sawchuk),

¹ *Vibrations* was a collaboration between VibraFusionLab (London, Ontario), Together! 2012 CIC (East London, UK), and Concordia University's Millieux: Institute for Arts, Culture and Technology. The project brought together

which featured technologically innovative artworks by Deaf/disabled artists, many of whom worked in collaboration with VibraFusionLab's (London, Ontario) David Bobier over the past two years, as well as in partnership with [Together! 2012](#) (East London, UK), particularly the organization's Artistic Director, Dr. Ju Gosling and Chair, Julie Newman.

With a focus on Deaf/disabled art and aesthetics, research-creation practices, and community intersectionalities, throughout the workshops, the symposium, and the exhibition a multiplicity of sub-themes were addressed. These themes included: temporality, rhythm and pacing in 'crip' aesthetics; synesthesia and embodiment; disability poetics in new and 'old' media practices; techno-bodies and haptic interfaces; visualizing invisible disabilities; intersectionality and disability arts; indigeneity and disability; disability arts and online platforms. The activities and the conversations that emerged out of these events point to the wide array of practices and perspectives constitutive of Deaf/disability arts today as well as to the vital need for spaces where such practices and perspectives can be openly shared to contribute to what Bridger, Erlikh, and Yi refer to as "a new wave in disability art" (this issue).

The event itself centered its activities and design around accessibility and inclusive approaches of event gatherings. Working closely with two accessibility consultants from the disability and neurodivergent community, and advising closely with our network of language interpreters around how to host simultaneous French, English, American Sign Language, *Langues des signes québécoise* (LSQ), and audio visual description translation, VIBE tested how to create a welcoming space for people with a variety of accessibility and linguistic needs. As organizers, we wanted to ensure our conference felt as relaxed as possible (nodding to the relaxed performance movement). We included the choice of attendees to either sit in chairs or lay comfortably on the ground on very thick fitness mats provided by our university's athletic services. In addition, we designed 20-25 minute breaks between each panel, ensuring our attendees never felt rushed and had cerebral space between presentation and panels. We created a quiet space lit by lamps with blankets and mats for anyone that wished to step away from the main symposium activities. One of the most significant achievements was working with undergraduate student attendants which helped guide and support our attendees' access and presentation needs— opening doors, providing physical support, and acting as a go-to-people between us (the organizers) and participants. VIBE served as a promising model to think through what it means to invite and to support a diverse international group to a Canadian university, such as at Concordia.

Montreal-based and East London-based disabled artists through co-produced digital artworks. The project was funded by the British Council Canada and the Province of Quebec through a 2-year bilateral cultural exchange program QC-UK Connections. During the duration of the Concordia-based exhibition, members of Together! 2012 also hosted their own set of activities, in relationship to the conversations we had over the 2-year partnership.

Goals and Objectives

The overall goal of VIBE and the related events was to stage – and enable – a set of generative meetings between constituents from the Deaf and disability arts and academic scene in Quebec, Canada and participating regions, including the US and UK. Communities, as scholars have argued, do not simply exist but are constituted through practices and events (Agamben, 1993). Deaf/disabled worlds can be divided by intersecting dimensions of our identities: by language, by specific disability, by occupation, by artistic practice as well as by race, class, religion, geographic region, and gender. By presenting papers, giving workshops, artist talks, or sharing a performance, VIBE brought together constituents from Deaf/disability worlds, as well as allied communities, shared a sense of belonging and a sense of community that still reverberates.

Art historian Ann Millett-Gallant (2010) notes, “Predominant beliefs purport disability as a limitation engendered in the body, not as an opportunity for alternative or unique perspectives” (p. 10). The symposium, the exhibition and workshop all demonstrated, in distinct ways, that if disability is framed, not as a deficit but as a valuable difference, the possibilities for on-going experimentation open up. The symposium’s title, VIBE, has a multiplicity of meaningful resonances for the organizers and participants that speak to the goals of the activities:

- 1) To underscore the importance of critical disability studies to the humanities
- 2) To honour the legacy of the late disability theorist Tobin Siebers, whose writings on disability aesthetics cogently and movingly assert the power of affective relations between bodies.
- 3) To consider embodiment and disability aesthetics to include forms of kinaesthetic exchange, ‘hapticity’, touch and resonance, ways of being together.
- 4) To highlight the significant work of 2-year collaboration with disability artist and VibraFusionLab director David Bobier and the UK community arts collective Together! 2012 (particularly exchanges with Dr. Ju Gosling and Julie Newman).
- 5) To mobilize the pop culture term “vibe” to draw attention to the affective politics of disability and the potential of the arts to create commonality and shift the attitudes that subtend discrimination.

These overall goals speak to another specific objective of VIBE: to affirm that attention to corporeal and neuro-atypical differences within the Deaf and disabled art world can generate new forms of knowledge, methods, theoretical concepts, and technologies. The workshops, symposium, and exhibition both demonstrated the innovative practices emerging from these

worlds and confronted the many subtle, and overt, ways that able-ism is embedded in institutions, norms, and practices.

Inviting New Perspective and Community Connections

This issue on VIBE's events builds on and contributes to the burgeoning work investigating the centrality of disability to the arts and the significance of aesthetics to disability, putting this work into conversation with local Deaf and disability cultures and traditions of research-creation as an artistic and academic practice (Bénard, 2017; Blais, 2006; Cachia, 2013; Chandler & Rice, 2013; Dokumaci, 2016; Ginsburg & Rapp, 2013; Howe et al., 2015; Johnston, 2012; Leduc, 2016; Kafer, 2013; Koppers, 2014; McAskill, 2017; Millet-Gallant, 2010; Mills & Sterne, 2017; Parent, 2017; Rice et al., 2015; Sandahl, 2005; Sawchuk, 2014; Siebers, 2010). We have divided the issue into 4 main sections: 1) Full Length Peer-Reviewed Articles; 2) Creative Writing; 3) Practitioner's Notes; and 4) Artist Statements. Contributions to the journal come from VIBE symposium participants as well as from artists involved in the *Vibrations* exhibition, with there often being an overlap. The full-length peer-reviewed articles provide a glimpse of the *Vibrations* exhibition and some of the specific works included in it, as well as a forum for artists participating in the symposium to offer reflections on their practices and experiences, in a way that connects them to wider thematic concerns in Deaf and disability arts. The Creative Writing section features works of poetry and creative non-fiction from symposium and exhibition participants. The Practitioners Notes section features interviews and written contributions from creative practitioners expressing their recommendations, reflections, and experiences in their respective fields. Finally, the Artist Statement's section provides a space for VIBE participants who contributed to the symposium's exhibition of creative works and VIBE Art Night to contribute thoughts on their specific work and/or on their artistic process.

Deaf and disabled arts, so we assert, are playing an important, yet undervalued, role in the development of the arts and to what Canadians call research-creation. Research-creation promotes new forms of knowledge-generation from artistic and creative endeavours. It demands that creators explain how this has been done as well as explain the knowledges that emerges from and through creation (Chapman and Sawchuk, 2012). Important examples of the development of new methods for research-creation from a disability perspective include Parent's (2016) "wheeling videos and interviews", Leduc's (2016) use of video animation and LSQ signing as part of her doctoral research on Deafhood in Quebec, and Dokumaci's (2018) ruminations on "disability as method."

This special issue discusses the planned activities of the symposium and workshop participants, and highlights the necessity of inviting and giving space to those who are new to the field as well as to leaders who have been a part of the discussion on disability arts and culture. As disability justice educator and writer Mia Mingus (2011; 2017) suggests, this involves moving from the creation of situations of 'forced intimacy', in which disabled people are

expected to be vulnerable, into one that embraces “access intimacy”, whereby access needs are comfortably communicated in ways that bring people closer. The special issue seeks to show the value of what it means to make art and culture inclusive and accessible by creating the conditions for Deaf and disabled artists to participate at every level of cultural production. Through our contributors artistic and theoretical sharings, we hope this issue instills a sense of commonality through difference and community.

For more archival access to the VIBE event and select participant interviews, please visit our website:

<https://vibe2018.com/>

References:

1. Agamben, G. (1993). *The Coming Community* (M. Hardt, Trans.). University Of Minnesota Press.
2. Bénard, M. (2017). Promouvoir l’accessibilité à l’aide de la loi: Un appel à une réforme législative au Québec. *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*, 6(2), 78–111. <https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v6i2.351>
3. Blais, M. (2006). *La culture sourde: Quêtes identitaires au coeur de la communication*. Presses Université Laval.
4. Bridger, M., Erlikh, S., & Yi, C. (Sandie). (n.d.). *Reverberation! A New Wave In Disability Art*.
5. Cachia, A. (2013). ‘Disabling’ the Museum: Curator as Infrastructural Activist. *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*, 2(4), 1–39. <https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v2i4.110>
6. Chandler, E., & Rice, C. (2013). Alterity In/Of Happiness: Reflecting on the radical possibilities of unruly bodies. *Health, Culture and Society; Pittsburgh*, 5(1), n/a. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5195/hcs.2013.146>
7. Chapman, O., & Sawchuk, K. (2012). Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and “Family Resemblances.” *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 37, 5–26.
8. Dokumaci, A. (2018). Disability as Method: Interventions in the Habitus of Ableism through Media-Creation. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 38(3), Article 3. <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v38i3.6491>
9. Dokumaci Vincent, A. (2016). “Affordance Creations of Disability Performance: Limits of a Disabled Theater.” *Theatre Research in Canada*, 37(2), 164–201.
10. Ginsburg, F., & Rapp, R. (2013). Disability Worlds. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 42(1), 53–68. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155502>
11. Howe, B., Jensen-Moulton, S., Lerner, N., & Straus, J. (Eds.). (2015). *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*. Oxford University Press.
12. Johnston, K. (2012). *Stage Turns: Canadian Disability Theatre*. McGill-Queen’s University Press.
13. Kafer, A. (2013). *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Indiana University Press.
14. Koppers, P. (2014). *Studying Disability Arts and Culture: An Introduction* (2014 edition). Palgrave Macmillan.

15. Leduc, V. (2016). *C'est tombé dans l'oreille d'une Sourde: La sourditude par la bande dessinée* [Ph.D., Université de Montréal].
<https://papyrus.bib.umontreal.ca/xmlui/handle/1866/18443>
16. McAskill, A. (2017). Approche atypique avec Les Muses de Montréal: Radicaliser la place des artistes handicapés au Québec. *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*, 6(2), 132–154. <https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v6i2.353>
17. Millett-Gallant, A. (2010). *The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art*. Palgrave Macmillan.
18. Mills, M., & Sterne, J. (2017). Dismediation—Three Proposals, Six Tactics. In E. Ellcessor & B. Kirkpatrick (Eds.), *Disability Media Studies* (pp. 365–378). NYU Press.
19. Mingus, M. (2011, May 5). Access Intimacy: The Missing Link. *Leaving Evidence*.
<https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/>
20. Mingus, M. (2017, August 6). Forced Intimacy: An Ableist Norm. *Leaving Evidence*.
<https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/>
21. Parent, L. (2016). The wheeling interview: Mobile methods and disability. *Mobilities*, 11(4), 521–532. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2016.1211820>
22. Parent, L. (2017). Ableism/disablism, on dit ça comment en français? *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*, 6(2), 183–212. <https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v6i2.355>
23. Rice, C., Chandler, E., Harrison, E., Liddiard, K., & Ferrari, M. (2015). Project Re•Vision: Disability at the edges of representation. *Disability & Society*, 30(4), 513–527. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2015.1037950>
24. Sandahl, C. (2005). Tyranny of the Neutral. In C. Sandahl & P. Auslander (Eds.), *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance* (pp. 255–267). University of Michigan Press.
25. Sawchuk, K. (2014). Impaired. In P. Adey, D. Bissell, K. Hannam, P. Merriman, & M. Sheller (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities* (pp. 409–420). Routledge.
26. Siebers, T. A. (2010). *Disability Aesthetics*. University of Michigan Press.
27. Ware, S. M. (2014, January 29). Syrus Marcus Ware on: Intersectionality, story-telling, and disability arts movements/Interviewer: Shamina Chherawala. *SITE-SPECIFIC*.
<http://blog.ocad.ca/wordpress/site-specific/2014/01/syrus-marcus-ware-on-intersectionality-story-telling-and-disability-arts-movements/>