

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

Visual Retrospection: Rhyming Art with Access
Rétrospective visuelle : Faire rimer l'art avec l'accès

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Abstract

This work of creative nonfiction memoir reflects on the philosophical, ethical, and creative perspectives that informed the author's book-length lyric essay, *Visual Inspection*. The essay connects the practices of art-making and access-making as concomitant ethical activities.

Résumé

Ce mémoire de non-fiction créative examine les perspectives philosophiques, éthiques et créatives qui ont orienté l'essai lyrique de l'auteur intitulé *Visual Inspection*. L'essai relie les pratiques de création artistique et de création d'accès en tant qu'activités éthiques concomitantes.

Key Words: Poetry, Open Access, Aesthetics, Creative Nonfiction, Illness, Community

I was born with difficulty breathing.

That's the first line of your book-length lyric essay, *Visual Inspection*, and the first words you read at the VIBE Symposium at Concordia University in the early afternoon of December 1, 2018.

Outside: Half-light of late autumn. Rain or almost-snow.

Inside: Half-light of florescence. Weather of tables and chairs and microphones.

Inside: Nervous. Wheezing.

Nervous for reasons familiar: sense of fraudulence, lack of confidence in your knowledge, lack of confidence in the value of your story, sense of inferiority in the presence of the courage and brilliance already witnessed, fear of rejection.

Your book is not out yet. Not public. You've never shared this with strangers.

*

The vibe from the first moment of the symposium is ease. You cry at the first speaker on the first panel on the first day. You cry out of recognition.

You witness each other in each other. You have experiences that resonate in the community of those rooms. Collective you. Western you. You/You.

That resonance—that vibe; for what is resonance but vibrations—does half the work of explaining yourselves. Understanding is an experience of resonance. It's a vibe.

Surprise: telling your story to a room full of understanding souls your breathing eases.

Ease and wheeze rhyme. They resonate: their shared sounds amplify the signal. For a poet, this is important information.

*

Visual Inspection is about poetry, access, and our embodied lives. That's what the poster for the book launch at a local brewery says. It's also about being guided, redaction, mapping, pain, and community. Among other things.

What it's really about is what it was like to make it and what it's like now to read it.

Or listen to it read by your wife or your sister or your computer. Or what you say it's about now. Or what others say it's about.

*

One Tuesday in April, a producer from CBC Radio calls you to prepare for an interview about *Visual Inspection* the following morning.

I don't really understand what this book is about, she says.

It's about poetry, access and our embodied lives, you say.

There's a rhyme deep in the heart of the book, you say.

The rhyme is between the sound of negotiating access and the sound of making art.

I don't know, she says, that we can sum this up in five minutes on the radio.

All your life you've experienced constriction in your small and large airways.

*

You're allergic to animals with hair, animals with feathers, animals that are dust mites (both the old and new world variety), foods that come from animals, foods that are animals, foods grown to feed animals (including humans), trees with leaves, trees with needles (which are, really just leaves), grasses (which resemble the leaves of some trees), molds (which are plants that seem like animals or animals that seem like plants or neither), and the sun.

The sun is a giant nuclear reactor the perfect distance from Earth. Harold Rhenisch said that.

Many flowers resemble the sun on which they feed. This is no coincidence. This is resonance. Rhyme.

Western medicine calls your chronic inflammation in the lungs, sinuses, and skin, your predisposition to allergic hypersensitivity, *atopy* or *atopic syndrome*.

From the Greek word for “placelessness” ἀτοπία (*atopia*). From “a” meaning *without*, and “topos” meaning *place*.

Roland Barthes uses the term in *A Lover’s Discourse* to propose a register of language without predicate, something always changing. In a typically Barthesian way, the term is neither positive nor negative, but neutral. A kind of portal.

To help hear the rhyme at the heart of *Visual Inspection*, let’s run through the scales as you’ve come to hear them.

*

First scale:

Art is an arrangement of elements towards beauty. Beauty is a synonym for good.ⁱ

To make art is to bring something good into the world. To arrange the elements of the world toward beauty.

You, the artist, has a guiding sense of what’s good that allows you to make choices toward beauty. Only through the process of making do you discover the definitive qualities of the artwork you create.

You call that sense of the good *aesthetics*. You’d also call it *love*. If you felt safe telling your secrets.

Tobin Siebers: “Aesthetics tracks the sensations that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies.”

In the presence of blooming alder trees, you feel your eyes burning. In the presence of fresh cut grass, you smell burning smoke. Then your lungs begin to constrict.

If we expand the idea of “bodies” to include all material objects and beings, your aesthetic preferences have been shaped by varying degrees of mortal danger to a wide array of typically innocuous, and often supportive, bodies.

Nana Rader: “You don’t have to like everyone; you just have to love them.”

Art is a communal activity. The community of artist and audience. The community of the artist’s body. The body of the art work. The body of response. The community of spirit.

*

Second Scale:

All people negotiate access all the time. Access means different things to different people in different circumstances.

Access to space, access to comfort, access to knowledge. Social access—access to built-environments both physical and conceptual—is denied/restricted socially.

Sometimes access is denied for reasons you respect: holy sites, dangerous chemicals, sensitive habitats. Too often denial of access arises formally—e.g. from the arrangement of elements in the construction of a building or bureaucracy—and constitutes what Siebers calls “disqualification” of individuals or groups of individuals with particular traits or circumstances.

Cornel West: “Justice is what love looks like in public.”

Access in such cases is a synonym for good. For justice. For love. To create access for people denied access is to arrange the elements towards beauty. What guides our choices towards greater access? A sense of the good, of beauty.

Radical access—as in from the root—cannot be top down. It’s created by community in community.

*

The narrative frame of *Visual Inspection* is an eyes-closed walking tour social practice artist, Carmen Papalia, led for 35 artists, writers, academics and community members through downtown Kelowna in July 2016.

Papalia is legally blind. He calls himself a “non-visual learner.”

In the tour you placed your hands on the shoulders of the person in front of yourselves and walked for 1.5 hours down an alley, over the steps of the court house, across Water Street, around the Delta Grand Hotel, including over the small locks between the lake and the canal system around the hotel, past the sculpture of three white dolphins frolicking 400 kms from the ocean (the sculpture is called “Euphoria), back across Water Street, along the parking lot of Prospera Place (the minor league hockey arena named after a nationwide Credit Union), returning to where you started in front of the Rotary Centre for the Arts.

Papalia: “Open access is emergent, collectively-held space in which members can find comfort in disclosing their needs and preference with one another. It is a responsive support network that adapts as needs and available resources change.”ⁱⁱ

*

The rhyme about art and access sounds like this: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."ⁱⁱⁱ

*

There are people you love whose homes you’ve never visited because your hypersensitivity puts you in mortal danger.

*

Sensitive equipment can detect the most subtle vibrations.

*

In your early 30s you began to experience debilitating pain throughout your body. You’d go for a run as you’d done for years and collapse into tears when you returned home.

Often, you couldn't even hold open a book.

This pain was diagnosed through bloodwork, magnetic imaging, pharmaceutical experimentation and clinical appraisal as *psoriatic arthritis*.

Two more words of Greek origin. From "anthron" meaning "a joint" and "psora" meaning "itch." A surprisingly accurate description of your writing practice: joints of chronic irritation.

*

The walking tour is a poem. A monostich. A single, lengthy line of poetry.

When you lose contact with the person directly in front of you in the walking tour you yell "Break!"

When you end a line of poetry, you call it a line break. The collective you.

Units in poetry include words, phrases, lines, and stanzas. Classically, poets compose on the level of the line or the stanza. Some poets compose in the unit of the page. Or contemporarily, the screen.

The walking tour is a poem called "The Eyes-Closed Walking Tour."

The units of the poem are human bodies.

The content of the poems are the bodies, minds, souls of the people who are present in the walking tour.

The para-text is the environment, the on-lookers and commentators, the urban language of concrete, asphalt, lawns. The primary critics are Okanagan Lake and the sky.

The form of the poem is organic to the content: it is determined by the content.

The poem called "The Eyes-Closed Walking Tour" breaks where it breaks, different each time Papalia convenes it (reads it?) because composed of different people in different orders over different pages (landscapes).

Samuel Taylor Coleridge: “[O]rganic form...is innate, it shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward Form.”

William Butler Yeats: “How can we know the dancer from the dance?”

This poem called “The Eyes-Closed Walking Tour” can never be said the same way twice. It’s recombinant. It’s alive.

Like the walking tour, poems are communal experiences. Their vibes come from how words sound in the minds of their readers.

The best poems are alive.

The best pomes are recombinant even when they appear fixed on the page.

Some poems are pomes and they appear on the branches of shrubs in the spring and can be eaten.

To engage poetry deeply is to be recombined in a space beyond the page that also includes the page because beyond the page is no-thingness which the page, like bodies, *is*. Just *is*.

Atopy. No-place.

Bear with me. That’s a pun. That’s a joke.

Break!

*

Access to a poem depends on who and what is present and how they *present*. Poet. Reader. Other Poems. Teachers. Guides. The light streaming through the kitchen window while you’re explaining yourself to the CBC.

Papalia: “Open Access relies on who is present, what their needs are and how they can find support with each other and in their communities. It is a perpetual negotiation of trust between those who elect to be in support of one another in a mutual exchange.”

Rader: Poetry relies on who is present, what their needs are and how they can find support with each other and in their communities. It is a perpetual negotiation of trust between those who elect to be in support of one another in a mutual exchange.

*

You wanted to know how your body influences your aesthetic preferences, how it shapes what you make. You started a research project called Visual Inspection that became a book called *Visual Inspection*.

You talked about it to lovely strangers in Montreal.

You wanted to use your body—the conditions of your body—as a portal to go further into your body.

You imagined that your book would be composed according to the unit of your body. That it would respond and represent the peculiarities of your particular body, your experience of health, the tone of the field of your no-thing.

*

By the time you speak at VIBE, you've accepted your failure to make a book composed according to the unit of your body. Maybe all poems are composed by the unit of the poet's body. You make that claim. But what does that mean?

Visual Inspection was not composed as a poem.

You offer the forthcoming book as a record and testament of your failure.

*

In the kitchen, when you end the call with the CBC producer, you're not wearing a shirt. Let's not turn this into a symbol.

It's April. Midday.

Outside: wide-open light. Bird chatter. Low-key highway traffic two blocks away.

Inside: clean dishes on the counter, kraken of aloe plant,
quietude.

Inside: disappointment, frustration, but... something opening...
a resonance... a vibe...

*

Yesterday the CBC called to talk about the book, you tell the
audience crowded into the narrow, dim brewery in the
warehouse district of your small Canadian city.

Half the people are here for the beer. Half the people work here.
Half the people are your family and coworkers.

You believe in the emptiness of absolute presence.

You do the math. The other you.

The producer wanted me to tell her what the book *is*, you say to
the people who've elected to be in support of you on the
occasion of *Visual Inspection*.

Actually, she wanted to know what the book is *about*. You don't
say this. The western-mind is all preposition. Consciousness *of*.

But I couldn't, you say. I couldn't tell her in a way that made
sense to her.

Constricted airways.

Up until yesterday, you admit, I thought I'd failed to make what
I'd set out to make. Failed to make something that was
composed through attention to my body, my health.

I was wrong.

My failure to explain the book to the producer from CBC opened
an explanation for me. Gave me access.

Visual Inspection is as unclassifiable as my health.

This is all you want to say.

ⁱ Good is also a synonym for right, correct, proper, law-abiding, etc. for which beauty, to your ear, is not. What counterpoint then to hear these resistances within the words we tune to!

ⁱⁱ From Carmen Papalia's "Open Access Tenets" which he's been sharing publicly across North America and England. For more info please refer to "An Accessibility Manifesto for the Arts" published January 2, 2018 in Canadian Art: <https://canadianart.ca/essays/access-revived/>

ⁱⁱⁱ John Keats, "Ode to a Grecian Urn"

Bio:

Matt Rader is an Associate Professor in Creative Studies, Creative Writing at UBC- Okanagan Campus. His primary area of interest is the *writing of lyric poetry*. Guided by poetic history, tradition, form, and genre, Matt's poems engage specifically with the *post-colonial imaginaries* and *eco-cultures* of Vancouver Island and the central Okanagan. Since 2014, his research has included a significant interest in *embodied poetics, disability aesthetics, and access*, which he has explored through social practice art and creative nonfiction. He also works in short fiction, the primary theme being working-class history and lives. Matt has won numerous awards and prizes for his writings, including the I Am Accessible Teaching Award (2017) for his efforts to create an accessible learning environment, as well as grants from competitive funding agencies such as SSHRC and Canada Council for the Arts.