

'OUT FROM UNDER': A BRIEF HISTORY OF EVERYTHING ¹

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From September 2006 to July 2008, the School of Disability Studies at Ryerson University in Toronto produced an exhibit titled *Out from Under: Disability, History and Things to Remember*. Activist in its content and orientation alike, the exhibit both championed historical acts and moments of social transformation at the same time as it proceeded from an activist curatorial position – one intended to contribute to progressive understandings of disablement. The authors of this chapter were all involved; Catherine, Melanie and Kathryn as co-curators, Phaedra as one of fourteen exhibitors.² In this reflective account, we narrate our way from the invitation that sparked the School's engagement to the exhibit's initial installation in a disability arts festival, to its further installation in a première Canadian cultural venue – the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM).

As we go, we imagine the disabled artists and performers who are creating disability arts and culture as an increasingly dynamic force for change in Canada and abroad (Abbas et al 2004; Roman & Frazee 2009). We imagine disability activists whose stories, individually and collectively, gave *Out from Under* its energy and direction. And we imagine students of Disability Studies – our own students – who are learning and negotiating disability politics, as well as practices of activist and arts-informed inquiry. What have we learned that can assist these audiences in their various tasks? Having navigated our way into a major museum, what is revealed from a position of disability presence rather than absence? What are the complexities surrounding how a completed work – an exhibit already curated and produced for another setting – is received, supported and interpreted to the public by a host museum? Finally, what are the implications for practitioners, located in museums and other cultural organizations, of engaging with an activist approach to interpretation, one that challenges conventional modes of exhibit development?

Contemplating this writing, we were flooded with the enormity of attempting to convey the history we have lived with *Out from Under*. For two years, every action we took to move the exhibit ahead required us to negotiate the politics of disability representation that are tucked into a relentless progression of mundane tasks and decisions. For this reason, our chapter gives you a broad sweep of the whole process – foregoing for now the pleasures of probing its nooks and crannies. We glance back in time to the exhibit's origins, peer behind the scenes to reveal its key deliberations and turning points and highlight the ways in which exhibiting involved risk and discovery, celebration and remembrance, social inquiry and political action.

ORIGINS -- Curatorial Narrative

In 2006, organizers for the Abilities Arts Festival, an event celebrating Disability arts and culture, approached the School of Disability Studies³ with a request that we contribute a Canadian disability history exhibit to their autumn 2007 program. This invitation signifies the beginning of a broader process of community-university connection that is woven through the project. Who we are is one strand of that pattern. Arriving late to academic careers, each of us trails a long history of paid and volunteer work with community-based organizations – local and national. Each of us lives in, fosters and/or draws from networks of relationship to disability worlds: physical, intellectual, and/or psychiatric. Each of us, in different ways, chips away at an activist agenda. We are border-crossers; hybrid rather than ‘pure’ scholars, and this subjectivity was a key ingredient of our project. Neither historians nor museum specialists, our particularities remain central to the broader account of disability history that we mobilized together.

We begin by recounting the origins of *Out from Under* in a voice that could be called the ‘curatorial we’. It conforms to the shape that we – Catherine, Melanie and Kathryn – have given to our labors in the ebb and flow of ‘dialogue’ at each stage of this project.

Invoking the classroom

In the winter of 2007 the School of Disability Studies, with the clock ticking on the Festival invitation, we introduced a Special Topics course titled ‘Exhibiting Activist Disability History’. Working from critical questions such as ‘what is history?’ and ‘who gets to make it?’, we began to mobilize an exhibit that would profile resistance to discrimination and the marginalization of disabled people.

One of our innovations, then, was to jumpstart exhibit development through the reciprocal learning and teaching of the classroom. The strength of this move lay in adopting a forum in which disability representation is already on the agenda. As a School, we marinate continuously in the struggle to address the invisibility of disabled people in and across a range of situations without reproducing or reinforcing ‘that telling glance’ (Davis 2002: 35) or ‘the stare’ that turns people with disabilities into objects of curiosity (Garland-Thomson 2006). Working with this dilemma is front and centre in everything we do. So, although exhibit development was new on our list, it made sense that we would favor our own expertise.

There were, however, limitations to this approach. Although we knew we would present the exhibit at least once in the disability community, we had no reassurance that our project would ever find an audience with the general public. Working without a museum partner, we had limited access to the display and production skills that abound in these institutions. Nor could we call upon their financial resources. At the same time, by containing the development process,

we buffered museum personnel from exposure to the political sensitivities surrounding disability until after the exhibit was fully developed. Had they worked with us from the ground up, they would have confronted more 'harshly' situations and positions that we introduced 'softly' at a later stage in the process. Our relative isolationism prevented the direct transfer of representational expertise to the museum itself, and thus was less effective in altering taken-for-granted practices. On the other hand, it permitted our exhibitors to proceed boldly, without the censorial inhibitions of institutional oversight. The benefits and drawbacks of this situation would become more clear as our work progressed.

Engaging the students

Making exhibits more responsive to diverse communities is not just about choosing new or different artifacts – it is also about making new social relations. In the UK, for example, The Research Centre for Museums and Galleries recruited disabled individuals who were also experts in the cultural field to constitute a 'think-tank' that would play a central role in shaping the interventions that eventually appeared in venues across England and Scotland (Dodd, Sandell, Jolly & Jones 2008). Our 'think tank' was comprised of people who assembled for the course, a group that assumed some unusual features. It included several students of Disability Studies who registered for credit. Active as undergraduates in our program, these individuals are simultaneously workers with disability-related job histories. As word of the project spread, we acquired significant others: alumni yearning to return to our hothouse of activist scholarship, a researcher with a national independent living organization, and scholars from other universities. We enhanced and extended the group by inviting recognized leaders of the disability movement to join us.

Quite naturally, these people hooked us into disability as it is transacted and negotiated in the environments they inhabit: from large congregate care settings to community organizations and service agencies, from school systems to trade unions. The disability activists strengthened our grounding in the lived history of their work, while connecting us to representative organizations. They contributed decades of experience with education, career and advocacy initiatives as well as irreplaceable knowledge of human rights campaigns and public policy battles. To press the meaning of representation, then, it was not so much who each member represented that mattered as the fact that each one took on the task of representing what we were doing to the key groups and audiences in their networks. Our work radiated out from this human centre.

Thus we did not follow the more conventional practice of selecting participants in order to represent a particular range of disability experiences or organizations. Instead, we created an opportunity for collective work that expressed our actual circumstances and invited membership to form around it. By stretching the definition of 'student' in unusual ways, we built a group – primarily women – whose members extended and complicated the project's portrait of participation.

Our task was to work across diverse locations and mixed embodiments in the creation of an exhibit. What we shared in common was a point of view as protagonists, participants and allies to progressive social movements in Canada.

Gleaning a collection

Out from Under started with a group of people rather than a collection. In order to establish a material base for exhibition, each participant in the course was asked to bring an object that they felt was significant to disability history. Trusting our decision to 'fall into' rather than to drive the project, we had no idea what things would turn up (Church 2008). However, we found that we had provoked a collection of 13 objects: a shovel, photos of three early residents of a psychiatric hospital, a poster, a sweat suit, an IQ test, a program from the Shriners' Circus, a trunk, a portable respirator, a death certificate, a Braille watch, a bulletin board, a photo of a disability activist, and a Canadian flag.

Looking back, it is clear that we side-stepped two dilemmas: one of working with pre-established collections, and another of choosing some objects over others. We simply accepted all of the objects that participants brought to class. In this way, object selection became a social process rather than a curatorial task. In the course of searching something out, each person not only helped generate a collection but developed a stake in it as well. All of us were delighted to encounter the objects that other participants had serendipitously 'found'. By the time the class met, these objects carried tracings of their relation to the contributor as well as to the histories of disabled people. The 'how I found it' stories became, unexpectedly, an important genre that we later incorporated into exhibit materials. Retaining and honoring these relations is evidence of the feminist methodology that lay, implicitly, at the heart of our project. The narrative and reflexive 'turns' (Kohler Riessman 2002) enabled us to savor the particularities of local stories while searching out their extra-local significance (Smith 1987).

Teaching for discovery

The course on exhibiting disability history was held over two weekends. Our approach was to excavate hidden disability histories through a process of presentation and amplification. During the first session, we orchestrated a 'go round' with all participants at the table, having them introduce their object, telling us why they thought it was important. Having dug deeper into their objects, participants arrived for the second 'go round' bearing not just the thing itself but a mock-up installation.

In both sessions, we relied on participant knowledge, impressions and associations to move explorations along. We worked from the particular object to the general context without erasing the links between them. We traced the connections between the objects and the people who owned or used them: past

and present, individuals and groups. While we were preoccupied with objects from start to finish, we worked towards a 'peopled' exhibit, one that would be alive with disabled characters, their families, friends and allies (Panitch 2008). Much creativity was at play here. In fact, we generated more ideas than we could use – as we were later to find out.

The process was not without risk. The exhibit might be too particular. Rooted in personal narratives, it might fail to communicate the broader patterns of disablement shaping the stories we told (Oliver 1990; Thomas, 2007). The exhibit would not be comprehensive of all disability movements, visionaries and watersheds, and would almost certainly fail to communicate the breadth and fullness of Canadian disability history. Worse, it might be considered elitist or exclusionary.

What constitutes 'history' in this context? This question was an active piece of our problematic. On the one hand, we were familiar with inter-disciplinary scholarship, Canadian and international, that could inform class discussions and exhibit themes. On the other hand, we knew that the written record on disability history – especially the activist history to which we aspired – is missing, fragmented, or hugely compromised both by medical fixations on deviance and pathology and by the cultural tropes of tragedy and heroism (Shakespeare 2000; Rieser 2004;). Given this circumstance, we could not use objects merely to reflect or illustrate a pre-existing and pre-authorized history. Instead, we drew what we could from scholarship that was aligned with our purposes even as we worked to fill scholarly silences by discovering and producing a fresh account (Panitch & Yoshida 2008).

Out from Under, then, arrived at a general history. Our almost random collection of objects opened into a much larger story of people with disabilities: generations of lives dominated by demeaning labels and life-altering categorization, by segregation and forced confinement, by the monotony and uniformity of institutional life, by unpaid labor and bodily harm, by the good intentions of charitable benefactors. Surfacing throughout are significant acts of individual achievement as well as the growth of national disability movements struggling to claim power, dignity and full citizenship rights.

That said, we have never viewed *Out from Under* as completely representative of disability history in Canada. Even when the exhibit was finally ready for installation, we understood it as a work-in-progress. Rather than definitive or comprehensive, the project was invitational. We used the objects we collected and the stories we derived from them to invite visitors and other potential exhibitors into a process of discovery that had only just begun. Clearly stated on the final text panel of the exhibit and repeated in the exhibit catalogue, our message remains the same. Our project is intended to spark further discoveries and reflections that advance the ongoing work of making disability history *public* history.

DELIBERATIONS AND TURNING POINTS

In this next section, we tease out various strands of labor whereby the authors engaged with the making of *Out from Under*. In the following exchanges, we break the 'curatorial we', used in the chapter thus far, in favor of singular voices. While creating an exhibit required tremendous collaboration from all of its participants, each also has their own story.

Designing (Kathryn)

By July 2007, our project had reached a point where participants from the exhibiting course were ready to present their work to the student body at the School's annual Summer Institute. Each tableau occupied its own table; each told a complete and complex story; each had a unique visual style that expressed its presenter's flair for display. This pilot presentation – not yet titled – excited audience members with both its historical assemblage and its method of working from objects. Some still prefer the immediacy and vitality of this iteration to those more polished versions that came later. As people mingled and chatted after the event, someone new circulated amongst them: drifting from table to table with notebook in hand was a design consultant named Debbie Adams.

Debbie was present because, as curators, we had reached a crucial turning point with our work. The course was over; our participants were drifting away to embrace the brief glow of summer. With a scant three months remaining before our Abilities Arts opening, the exhibit was still uncomfortably reminiscent of a high school science fair. We knew that an amateur production would not be taken seriously. Given that disabled people have long been treated as second-class citizens, we firmly believed that nothing less than a top quality production would suffice. From a design perspective, Debbie's major concern was to create a cohesive aesthetic for the exhibit, an instant signal to visitors that all of the installations belonged to the same storyline. She insisted that each installation revolve around a single object rather than the clusters that some had become. She pressed us to clarify the primary message that each would contribute to the whole. I bounced back and forth between designer and participants until we reached agreement over what to keep, what to remove and what might be added to each display.

It was a significant transition, and not always comfortable. On the one hand, participants lost a measure of control over their work; on the other, their installations were enhanced in useful and exciting ways. The process ended well for two reasons. While she sharpened the work done by participants, our design consultant respected and did not dislodge it. Participants retained the final say, even as they were pressed to find the critical essence of their installations. The summer passed in a blur. My days were organized around email and telephone exchanges with Debbie and tasks arising from our formidable

checklist, repeatedly revised as we inched towards the deadline. We plotted the exhibitors on a grid, charting everything that had to be assembled to complete each installation. Having 'de-cluttered' the project, Debbie now wanted to enhance its core objects by adding supporting materials: photos, archival documents, lists, letters, stickers, and clippings, for example. These had to be collected afresh, or manufactured.

While crafting a design that was sophisticated and flexible, Debbie also researched a display system to suit our needs. Her choice was comprised of aluminum rods and connectors, magnetic joints and light-weight metal trays that would be easy to assemble: 'like giant tinker toys', she reassured. Indeed, we assembled it ourselves the first time out. Taken with its practicality, we did not expect the pedagogical 'lift' the system gave to our modest collection. The effervescence of the tubular structure – its bird-like bones – allowed viewers to perceive and absorb the weighty social chronicle that it carried.

Crystallizing (Catherine)

As the enthusiasms of our intensive sessions built, a mosaic of contributor voices and styles found expression in titles for each of the thematic installations that comprised the whole. Some titles were ironic, while others were bittersweet. 'It's a Miracle!' wryly chided the hucksters of cure. Another title, 'Great Expectations' spoke wistfully of engagement in reform campaigns that yielded only symbolic results. Some were evocative, while others were declaratory. 'They Fed and Clothed Each Other' summoned the spirit of solidarity among asylum inmate-laborers. 'A Billboard is a Site of Struggle' drew attention to activist utterings pinned to workplace corkboards. Some were polemic, while others were rhetorical. 'No Voices, No Choices' challenged the clothing practices of institutions where residents' individuality was stifled. 'What's in a Name?' traced the eugenic history of medical categories carried forward into today's language of taunt and insult.

But would the intended ironies bound up in these cleverly constructed titles translate beyond 'insider' circles to viewers unfamiliar with disability history (and politics)? Would these titles beckon audiences accustomed to histories spoken in 'neutral' tones? Would they soothe where they sought to unsettle? Were they adequately calibrated for a liberal reader, a militant reader, a literal reader, a bigot? Did they leave enough, or too much, of the interpretive work for audience members to do for themselves?

Our design consultant helped us to appreciate the complexity embedded in these titles and impressed upon us the need for a harmonious, unified approach. Ever-vigilant to the perils of too much creativity, especially with an exhibition of such diverse perspectives, emotions and eras, she urged a rethinking, a higher-level curatorial venture in titling. On a conference call at summer's end, we brainstormed. It seemed an impossible task. Paring down the titles we had

might well reduce the chaos factor, but at what cost? Bland or overly simplistic would be intolerable. We resisted sacrificing the singularity of these assembled histories, and the powerful agency of their origins. As we contemplated how to generate some sense of movement and purpose in our titles we stumbled upon the possibility of single action words. A list of present participles began to emerge: 'Fixing', 'Aspiring', 'Labouring', 'Struggling', 'Dressing', 'Naming'. One by one, we warmed to the idea. 'Breathing' cinched the deal. An installation featuring a cuirass (a 1950s innovation in portable ventilator technology) had presented a particular challenge of focus. Originally titled 'Maverick Minister on the Move', this installation profiled the intrepid volunteerism of a pastor-turned-repair-mechanic who determined that his own daughter – and the sons and daughters of every community visited by polio – should live securely at home. The contributors, one of whom was herself a ventilator-user with deep activist credentials, were clear on the need for a message of liberation. But we worried that the overlays of benevolent service that audiences would likely bring to this narrative could eclipse the disability perspective necessary to understand the installation in the way that we intended. 'Helping' was not the story here. The revolutionary act of *breathing* was the story, supported by threads of resistance, ingenuity, and alliance. 'Breathing' was everything we could wish for in a title: simplicity paired with subversion, translating the everyday act of respiration as defiant and autonomous. The text crafted to accompany the installation would arc back to the title, leaving no room for misinterpretation:

This installation honors the man, the movement he nurtured
and each and every breath of freedom and flourishing in
Independent Living.

Musing (Phaedra)

The 14 separate exhibitors involved in creating *Out from Under* brought a diverse range of identities, allegiances and interests to the project. I contributed as an exhibitor and offer here my reflections on the experience as a museologist and museum professional, with activist experience. For some time before learning about the project, I had been researching a collection of archival photographs documenting a 1924 exhibition on mental health and early psychiatry in Canada. The question of how one might interpret their staged and offensively labelled images (see, for example, **Figure 1**) to contemporary museum audiences stymied me. Ethical concerns raised by the photos included: How might they be thoughtfully used today to address our history of discrimination against disability? The standards of care have changed and the young patients depicted would not be similarly photographed today; can their right to privacy be balanced with the desire to show how their condition was framed and labelled in 1924? Does the opportunity to challenge discrimination, afforded by displaying the images, outweigh the risk of offending viewers?

This project was a fortuitous opportunity for my study. Neither collections-based research nor 'best practice' in museum representation could resolve my questions. Conducting exhibit development in this unique classroom setting, I was not limited by conventional museum interpretation expectations, such as a focus on authenticity and provenance. The approach of *Out from Under* liberated my interpretation, allowing me to experiment with a shift from a material history analysis to arts-informed inquiry. I was able to address the ethical dilemma by transforming the original artefact into an artefact-cum-artwork.

Setting out with an exhibit agenda – to present disability history as an activist intervention – rather than an interpretive plan facilitated my process. As a group conceptualising art installations, we did not have to debate and come to consensus on a grand narrative of disability history to which we would each subscribe in our work; we could focus on the development of our own piece, independent of the others. Given the huge diversity of issues, moments and interpretations in Canadian disability history that could be presented, this avoided possible conflicts about priorities and privileging of some topics over others.

I took the photograph of a poster (**Figure 1**) as my object, and selected the bottom right image as the detail I would use. The girl in this image returns your gaze and asserts her social being. Her anonymous portrait's inscription is now an inflammatory label that reads 'Moron (high grade feeble-minded)'. Drawing on my experience and research in museum learning, I knew that the sensational nature of the poster demanded purposeful engagement with the viewer in order to stimulate self-reflection. Reproducing the image of the girl onto a mirror, I decided, would inscribe the viewer in the presentation, causing (at least) a literal reflection and hopefully a deeper intellectual response. My concern for purposeful display through viewer engagement was addressed by the same measure that addressed concern for the girl's privacy: with a cut out, reminiscent of the 'black box' treatment in later medical photos. While simply covering her eyes would have dehumanized her, when seeing our own eyes in her face, we cannot help but identify with the girl's ghostly image overlaid on the mirror.

With the portrait now reframed and transformed, the poster's antique medical terms still required viewer reflection. How could I keep the viewer from turning away from the emotionally charged terms – idiocy, imbecility, moron – and instead prompt thinking about how medical labels and negative attitudes towards disability have colluded over time to become colloquial slurs, or 'bad names'? I attempted a flip-book layering of chronologically labelled images, envisioning time-lapsed projections, to demonstrate shifts over time in medical terminology related to intellectual disability. My display text read:

What's in a Name?

Over the last century, the medical terms for intellectual disabilities have changed a lot.

How would you feel if you were called one of the names used in the pictures here?

The resulting prototype offered an interactive, but distracting, experience. Intent on a constructivist display (Hein 1998) employing experiential learning, I subsequently opted to simply use the mirror and add the list of 'names' under a redraft of the above text. I submitted my mirror, label text and a supplementary artist's statement for the Abilities Arts Festival exhibition, assuming my art installation would remain as I had created it.

In the months leading to the Festival, a designer was hired and the decision made to unify the displays textually and visually. Being minimal, it was decided that my display needed more content, to blend in. Although I resisted it, the archival image I had drawn from was added to the display. I was told some text from my artist statement would also be added. Shortly before the opening I was emailed the revisions – the leading question had been replaced with a text focused on the poster and sarcastic in tone. While I understood the intention behind the changes, the use of irony and the overshadowing of the engagement I had tried to create were frustrating. Although production had begun, a last minute addition of the text I had submitted was made, in small font under the mirror.

The display bears my name, but through design and curatorial choices, the final version is really a hybrid of two displays with different genres. In particular, the scale and prominence of the sensational poster competes visually and affectively with the mirror. The added text and image shift the display away from a history-informed art piece to artful social history; rather than experiencing ideas through a constructivist engagement, the display is shifted to achieve a didactic and expository mode of communication (Hein 1998). Showing the poster reintroduces ethical dilemmas I had chosen to avoid. This shift served the goals of exposing disability history and developing an overall aesthetic for the show, but I wonder if the compromise limits the transformative potential I had hoped to achieve in the 'Naming' installation.

Negotiating (Melanie)

In October 2007 *Out from Under* premiered at the Abilities Arts Festival where it was extraordinarily well received. By working our networks, we made sure that two highly placed members of the Royal Ontario Museum were in attendance: one was a senior manager with responsibility for exhibits, the other was a museum Trustee named Christine Karcza. A corporate champion for accessibility and a woman with a disability, Christine was already lobbying on our behalf. Our negotiations started right there on the exhibit floor. Reading the texts, the exhibit manager searched for balance in the presentation – her preferred style of museum interpretation – encountering instead, an unequivocal point of view.

She had misgivings. How might a residential worker react to the critique of her workplace depicted in 'Dressing?' Our response – that it had been written by someone who had worked in an institutional facility for many years – seemed only marginally reassuring. Yet, the exhibit manager was unable to resist the exhibit's striking design. If a balanced perspective was elusive, the high quality presentation and visual appeal of *Out From Under* was seductive. Shortly after this key encounter, we were invited to mount a 12 week run at the ROM.

A number of intersecting dynamics kindled that invitation. It came at a transitional moment when the ROM was, in the words of its CEO William Thorsell, 'creating a radical re-imagination of architecture, function and public space'. He spoke of its role as 'the new Agora, the common space, the new city square' (Thorsell 2007). Daniel Libeskind's artful Crystal had opened a new front door to the ROM, provoking animated public conversation about the museum's engagement with the city. For Christine Karcza, the time was ripe for our exhibit. She recognized it as the perfect vehicle to drive her activist message home to the Board of Trustees. And she had in her corner the newly appointed President of the ROM's Board of Governors, a one-time provincial government Minister under whose watch the landmark Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (2005) became law; a woman who recognized that welcoming the exhibit and its point of view could also be part of her legacy. Such was the terrain from which the invitation arose to bring *Out From Under* inside. But there were material forces, too. Compelled by the expense of the ROM's reinvention in the face of declining government operating support, the Museum was searching for bigger crowds and, of course, tickets at the door. In *Out From Under* they began to envision a new market.

Our adventure in search of history called upon negotiating skills at many turns: as teachers, we invited our students to negotiate the politics of display; as an academic collective we negotiated the concept of history itself; and as disability studies scholars we negotiated the very use of the word 'activist'. However deftly we may have maneuvered the various twists and turns to this point, the negotiating skills required to carry out the next phase of work – to see the exhibit displayed in one of Canada's foremost cultural institutions – were by far the most complicated and taxing. I likened the relationship to planning a wedding – with the ROM as our prospective in-laws. 'How do WE stay in charge?' I demanded in a marginal note to myself after only our second meeting with museum staff.

At the root of this tension was an encounter between two very different cultures. On the one hand was the enduring, longstanding and permanent reality of Canada's oldest and most established museum; on the other were the elastic, dynamic and gritty worlds of disability. Negotiating the ground between them permeated every arrangement we made with the ROM. Indeed, the Museum's well established practices set us up for marginalization, broken promises and inequities on a number of fronts – from exhibit space to opening ceremonies to communications strategies.

Our first adventure was a narrow escape from cramped quarters. Initially, we were offered a small room with three doors that attracted a steady traffic flow of ROM employees. Disappointed, we began the process of shrinking our layout, but voiced concerns about accessibility. It was later that the ROM fully appreciated the implications of this potential downsizing. Eager to showcase their accessibility agenda, the critical question suddenly dawned on them: How would VIP's comfortably view the exhibit in that tiny space on opening night? Concerned they would be severely criticized for a lack of accessibility, they found an alternative – overnight. If we delayed the opening by two months we could have the more generous 'west wing'. We were grateful. We needed the time. And they saved themselves considerable embarrassment.

Having won that battle, we proceeded towards a grand opening. The invitation to bring the exhibit into the ROM had come with an explicit promise of an evening celebration. Deep into planning, however, we were confronted with a last minute proposal to replace the much-anticipated evening gala with a scaled down mid-day coffee party. Was it because we were a community exhibit (not a blockbuster), a disability group (not prospective donors) that the promise of a gala could be so easily rescinded? If the word 'negotiate' is large enough to contain within it elements of protest, anger, disappointment and betrayal – all this we expressed to our ROM partners. A reversal of fortune was ultimately assisted by a successful approach to our University president who saw the strategic importance of the gala and offered to share the costs.

Designing the guest list was another contested arena. Both sides agreed to submit an equal number of names. But almost immediately this 50-50 split did not feel equitable. The museum's list included prominent citizens and members of boards and committees who frequently receive invitations to openings and decline a good many. On the community/university side, invitations of this sort were rare and eagerly sought after. We tried but failed to get a larger share. It was only when the electronic invitation was circulated that we saw our chance and seized it, forwarding it on in snowball fashion to swell our numbers and fill the gallery to capacity. RSVP's flooded into the Museum's central booking system from guests whose names appeared on no list at all – our allies and friends who were determined to be part of this historic moment.

On opening night, the gala welcomed 350 people, many from the disability community, who rolled up on the red carpet and took the crystal elevator to the third floor where they were greeted like royalty. It was a ritzy event with a menu that boasted an 'upscale take' on some old classics, all passed around by servers. At our behest attention was paid to allergies and food ingredients, to café tables and bars at various heights and hors d'oeuvres requiring minimal dexterity. As the celebration soared, only a handful of us knew that this extraordinary evening came perilously close to not happening.

Arriving: Catherine

Linton (1998: 3) describes one effect of disabled people's arrival in the public commons as 'upping the ante on the demands for a truly inclusive society'. Linton's use of a betting metaphor captures the sense in which our own efforts represented a high-stakes gamble. Our very presence at the Museum would mobilize the expectations of an astute and politicized disability community. We welcomed the leverage that such expectations afforded to a larger activist project – the project of 'making way' for disability in bastions of mainstream culture. But at the same time, we understood that falling short of an exemplary standard for accessibility would have dire consequences.

We tended to the details of the exhibit's actions features with ambition and fervour. All texts were produced in Braille, large print and audio formats. Supplementary verbal descriptions of the exhibit's visual elements were prepared precisely and evocatively, in a way that mirrored the tone and content of each installation.⁴ Video and audio podcasts of American Sign Language (ASL) and visual descriptive components were produced for online distribution via social networking sites. Replica artifacts had been procured by contributors and would be available for tactile examination by audience members with visual impairments. Supplementary programming would include a major public lecture on 'Blindness at the Museum' by international author and scholar Georgina Kleege⁵ – followed by a live staged reading of exhibit descriptions and texts. Our ASL translation represented a breakthrough in Deaf Cultural content: the interpreters were themselves culturally Deaf, their translation achieving a level of depth and fluency impossible in the signed English that is customary for such productions.⁶

But our ambitions were soon caught up in the slow grind of an enterprise less nimble than our small band of freewheeling, can-do collaborators. Weeks passed before the Museum could provide a mounted flat screen monitor for our ASL video in an ante-room adjacent to – but not inside – the exhibit. Wall-mounted boxes for Braille materials took a heartbreakingly long time to appear, and once installed, their contents were easily carried off and could not be promptly restocked. Touch table displays could not be secured and were therefore locked away, brought out only when volunteers were present to supervise their handling; the scheduling of these tactile opportunities remained sporadic and mostly inscrutable to potential users. Exhibit-specific training of volunteers was overlooked until a chance encounter with one of the exhibit curators made such training an urgent concern.⁷ Although exhibit text and interpretation was made available via podcasts, many audience members were unaccustomed to downloading these onto their own digital audio players before visiting the museum, and of the two units available for loan at the museum information desk, one that disappeared early in the exhibit's run was never replaced. Many other visitors were unfamiliar with digital technologies altogether, and unable for various reasons to operate them successfully to access the

exhibit text; many Deaf visitors did not own devices capable of playing the ASL and other video interpretation we had developed. Visitors with cognitive and learning impairments experienced the exhibit as 'textually dense' and 'too difficult to penetrate without significant support' (Ignagni and Abbas 2008: 90; Patterson et al 2008: 98-100).

Despite these difficulties, the presentation of *Out From Under* at the Royal Ontario Museum offered us a brief moment at the summit of our ambitions for entry into public culture. As gala guests poured in to the foyer of the steel and glass ROM Crystal – an extraordinary and dramatic 10-storey structure – they encountered a panoramic and utterly arresting projection on a massive overhead wall. There, in the soundless eloquence of American Sign Language, the première screening of our translation video privileged Deaf visitors with a sneak preview of what was to come and signaled to all, in proportions equal to the moment, a clear triumph of upstart ambition
Arriving, evidently, is merely where the journey begins.

RISING

To conclude, we return you to the exhibit's opening gala, a scene that Melanie set with her delicious back story. This was our finest hour. As the champagne flowed, in our finale for the formal ceremony, Christine and Catherine riffed through a kind of syncopated spoken-word anthem, free-associating from the phrases 'We remember', 'We celebrate' and 'We welcome'. With a sly grin, Catherine called out, 'Tonight, we remember that we belong, and that *belonging looks good on us*'.

Intended as radical incantation, the words affirmed the pride and place of an uppity rabble. We had arrived in significant number, and our presence was unmistakably consequential. There was much in this occasion to evoke Simi Linton's now-classic narration of a community having summoned 'the temerity to emerge':

We have come out not with brown woolen lap robes over our withered legs or dark glasses over our pale eyes but in shorts and sandals, in overalls and business suits, dressed for play and work – straightforward, unmasked, and unapologetic. We are, as Crosby, Stills, and Nash told their Woodstock audience, letting our 'freak flag fly'. ...We may drool, hear voices, speak in staccato syllables, wear catheters to collect our urine, or live with a compromised immune system ... [At last,] we have found one another and found a voice to express not despair at our fate but outrage at our social positioning (Linton 1998: 3-4).

Together, we were celebrating not so much the opening of an exhibit, as the rise of a body politic.

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¹ Our acknowledgement to Julie Young (2008) for the inspiration provided by her chapter title.

² *Out from Under* was created by 14 exhibitors working with 13 objects. They are: Terry Poirier, Ruth Stackhouse, Phaedra Livingstone, Sandra Phillips, Carrie Fyfe, Ryan Hutchins, Sarah May Glyn Williams, Audrey King, Karen Yoshida, Cindy Mitchell, Kim Wrigley Archer, Christine Brown, Jihan Abbas and Jim Derksen.

³ The organizational vehicle we used for this work is the Ryerson-RBC Institute for Disability Studies Research and Education. The Institute's contributions in cultivating both opportunity and audience for disability arts and culture are documented at www.ryerson.ca/ds/activism/performance.

⁴ Christine Brown, contributor of the installation titled 'Labouring', authored a complete visual description of the exhibit, after consultation with blind stakeholders and fellow contributors. David Reville, faculty member at the School of Disability Studies, subsequently performed an audio recording of these texts for CD and podcast distribution.

⁵ Presented at the Royal Ontario Museum, May 24, 2008.

⁶ ASL interpretation by Donovan Cooper and Giulio Schincariol; Project coordination by Penny Schincariol with Gus Mancini, consultant.

⁷ On a chance visit to the exhibit, Kathryn encountered a volunteer docent reinterpreting an installation that profiled asylum practices of unpaid patient labour. “Notice that they lived to be quite old,” he intoned. “They had food and a roof over their heads ... They were probably happier in the asylum than they would have been on the street.” Alarmed by his insistence upon a narrative of protective benevolence that covered over the exploitation of these women's labours, we (successfully) urged his reassignment to another area of the museum.