Site Unseen (2009): (Dis)abling Conditions at The Cultural Center – Four Perspectives

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On Monday, November 9th, Site Unseen (2009): (Dis)abling Conditions, a one night only event, occurred at the Chicago Cultural Center. Chicago Art Magazine sent the Friday Night Army to get “boots on the ground” coverage. Present at the event were: Senior FNA & CAM Critic Erik Wennermark, and FNAs Claire Lynch and Martha Sarno. We’ve also provided a response from the collaborators of From the Fat Off Our Bones: Katrina Chamberlin, James Kubie, and Joseph Belknap.

Erik Wennermark -

Judith Harding and Still Point Theater Collective "May I Have"

The dancers were poshly dressed in black suits with striking red cravats. They moved in a slow, methodical waltz, one two three, one two three, one two three. The floor was encircled by spectators, seated or leaning, but unswayed by music—the only sound was the shuffle of passersby and muffled conversation from the periphery. A bell rang. The paired dancers bowed, went on to find their next companion—it was to be a long chain of waltzing pairs—but were foiled, or perhaps saran-ed, by a wall of thin plastic separating them from the potentially forthcoming partner. Dismayed, a lonely dancer touched the barrier.  Looked at the barrier. Saddened, she crossed her arms, stared at the floor. A square of cloth fell from her suit to the floor. Acceptance and inspiration. She bent and lifted the barrier and ducked under. New pairs were made. Dancers bowed and spoke, "May I have..." The waltz continued.

The café of the Chicago Cultural Center was the dancehall. Site Unseen 2009: (Dis)abling Conditions was the occasion. A one-night event composed of theater, installation, video, and performance, Site Unseen provided a complex, affecting, and thoroughly engrossing collection of work that addressed the concept (as well the visceral reality) of what it means to be a person grappling with disability. The show’s curator, Julie Laffin, came to the theme as she suffers the crippling impact of severe environmental illness and complications from chronic Lyme disease. Her condition prevented her from attending the event, but she was able to interact with viewers by means of an online video chat on the massive screen of the Cultural Center’s Claudia Cassidy Theater as part of her piece Remote Intimations.
Julie Laffin "Remote Intimations"

Entering from Randolph Street, *May I Have*, the dance performance put on by Judith Harding with the Still Point Theater Collective, was the first piece I encountered, and was a perfect entrance to the show, instantly forcing me to interact with whatever ideas I had about disability and the disabled before I could move further. Many of the waltzing performers were developmentally disabled and they were, by nature of the piece, performing: a potential source of discomfort that didn’t take too long to dissipate seeing how much fun the dancers were having. Nonetheless, this sort of acclimation was crucial to the piece as well as one’s progress through the rest of the show. There would be no hiding, no shame, and no discomfort.

This sort of experience is one I am intimately familiar with and seeing how the work in Site Unseen handled the potential pitfalls was the main reason I wanted to see the show in the first place. My sister, Lisa Wennermark, was born with profound physical and developmental disabilities and was never able to live a life without the full time assistance of nurses and doctors. She passed away a few years ago after a life spent largely in a special needs home in rural Virginia, a place I visited many times and where I was constantly forced to encounter my own inner separation of the able and disabled world—even with my big sister in the place, I was still often uncomfortable and unsure. While her case was far more extreme than any of the participants in Site Unseen, my life experience undeniably colored my impressions of the show.

Owing to my history, I felt a huge emotional connection to much of the work in Site Unseen, a rarity with most art I encounter. And this may be my fault, encountering work as an “art critic” with the intention of being “critical,” rather than as a human being with the intention or possibility of being profoundly moved by beauty and the power of shared experience. (That being said, a lot of the work I happen by is so abstracted, repackaged and artified as to remove it from actual human experience, and no doubt that is the point of much of it, but I digress.) So yes, full disclosure, I may have had an unusually strong reaction to much of the work on display—though I think the great strength of the show lay in its ability to connect with the delicate place in each one of us disabled in its own private way.
Drew Browning and Annette Barbier of Unreal-estates' *Elevator Music* co-opted the Cultural Center’s elevator, turning it into a moving (as in mobile) discussion of disability as both identity and malady. Depending on what button is pressed, the riders are bombarded with voice and sound—readings from texts, quotes from disabled activists—rather than the sanitized rendition of *Girl from Ipanema* elevator riders expect. But the most striking impact of the work for me, as it related to the theme, was the sense of suffocation I dealt with in the elevator. Now, I don’t like elevators much to begin with, and in experiencing the piece spent way more time in the rapidly ascending and descending metal box than I would otherwise be comfortable with, but the experience of the sound and the enclosure somehow seemed to strip me of my will. I was being moved up and down, screamed at by a disembodied voice about eugenics and police policy regarding handcuffing a suspect who cannot hear. I felt helpless and out of control, unable to freely move, and was left frustrated and resentful.

Rahnee Patrick and Mike Ervin "The 2327 Commandments for Communicating with the Handicapable: Disability Etiquette 101"

*The 2327 Commandments for Communicating with the Handicapable: Disability Etiquette 101*, a sketch theater piece performed by husband and wife Rahnee Patrick and Mike Ervin, was a very funny, very damning assault on just the kind of pussy-footed vacillation one may have when encountering the disabled I mentioned earlier in conjunction with *May I Have*. The skit was set up to resemble an infomercial for a class, at the Holiday Inn Express in Oak Park Terrace no less, instructing regular type folk on the dangerous negotiation involved in communicating with a "handicapable." The low low price of $3000 includes discount parking, a box lunch, and provides such gems as "Always address them at eye level" (#1738), and "They always answer to the name Chuck" (#832). While in the first two pieces I encountered I was pushed towards melancholy or fear, the skit relied on humor as its main weapon in breaking down the supposed walls surrounding the disabled. It called into question many basic assumptions one may have about disabled people and mocked any attempt to patronize or otherwise pity. Its effectiveness was clear to me as, in writing this piece, I often wondered if I was unconsciously beholden to any of the 2327 rules—and I was.

Katrina Chamberlin, James Kubie and Joseph Belknap "From the Fat Off Our Bones"
From the Fat Off Our Bones, by James Kubie and Katrina Chamberlin with Joseph Belknap, was perhaps the most beautiful and well-realized piece in the show, and also the piece one would most likely encounter outside of this particular exhibition. If for those reasons it seemed slightly out of place in an otherwise expertly curated show, so be it. The video/installation/performance showed the circularity of the life cycle as expressed through (graphic) videos of the slaughter of a sheep and the rendering of its fat to make soap. The block of soap was then shaved by the artists in the center of the G.A.R. Memorial Hall and Rotunda and used to ritually wash the feet of viewers. Despite its myriad successes I viewed this complex, quiet and thorough meditation on death and loss with some questions: I was left to wonder if “death” could really be considered a disability. And, if so, what that said about “life.”

But what is it on the back, by Debra Tolchinsky, and shared body, by Marissa Perel and Madeleine Bailey, likewise expanded on my definition of disability. Tolchinsky’s video installation about her aged grandmother bringing dementia into the conversation; Perel and Bailey’s dance/performance engaging depression, physical pain, and insomnia. Another thing of note in these final three works was the artists’ expert integration of their work into the physical space of the Cultural Center. All three made beautiful use of a surprisingly beautiful building, greatly enhancing the impact of each piece.

Perhaps the show’s equivalent treatment of profound developmental disabilities with something like chronic pain or insomnia could read as insensitive or illegitimate, but also communicated the fact that we can only know our own bodies and the truth that all pain is relative. We can however empathize, we can try to understand, and Site Unseen served as a wonderful, moving attempt at a type of dialogue that rarely exists in the larger “able-bodied” world. If the show could teach us anything, it is that we all are disabled someway, emotionally, physically, psychologically, and that a little human compassion and empathy can go a long way to easing this collective burden. By taking time to listen, the show seemed to say, we can begin to understand, and grow much closer than we ever thought possible. Shows like Site Unseen may also bring awareness to the kind of assistance and funding people with disabilities need and deserve. From people like me, whose home was slowly abandoned to cobwebs over the years as the Virginia legislature repeatedly cut funding, to the soldiers coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan to a rat infested Walter Reed having lost limbs or suffering from equally crippling psychological disorders. If only we could get those in charge of such seemingly far away policy decisions to view a show like Site Unseen and experience disability in such thoughtful and ultimately personal ways, perhaps the bottom line would yield to more human(e) negotiations of budgetary restraints.

Two and a half hours later I returned to the café. The plastic walls had been ripped apart; dozens of swaths of red and black cloth littered the floor. The fancy dress no longer. The room was louder; there was still no music, but instead it was filled with applause and laughter. Any questions I had about the dancers endurance, any lingering thoughts of exploitation, vanished. The dancers still moved, sublime and spirited. The formal waltzing couples had become joyous circles of skipping threesomes and foursomes, passersby pulled into the fray. A woman grabbed a man’s hand as he shimmied in his wheelchair. I was interrupted from my fervent note-taking by two proffered hands and the words, “May I have…” I accepted and we danced into the night.

Claire Lynch -

One part of the video component of “From the Fat Off Our Bones”

Site Unseen 2009: (Dis)abling Conditions at the Chicago Cultural Center featured a group of several moving pieces of performance art. Themed around disabilities and people living with them, this exhibition promised art with a story, and it didn’t disappoint. Curator’s Julie Laffin’s struggle with Lyme disease set a sobering tone for the show, yet many areas of disability, physicality, and society, some uplifting, were touched on.

As a result of the Cultural Center’s multi-roomed and level layout, this show was interesting to navigate as a viewer. Something, or someone new was found behind every corner. Especially helpful was the use of light in several of these pieces. For instance, the entryway off of Randolph Street, already bustling, greeted onlookers with a group of dancers. Each couple waltzed, it seemed, within the confined spaces of a zig-zagged wall. Made of clear plastic, the dancers as a whole were visible all at once but ultimately separated into determined couples. There was no music playing and the lights were as bright as day, making the performers’ steps, facial expressions, and movements (often odd and stiff) most apparent. The performers insinuated they knew they were being watched, and the piece illustrative of one person’s struggle as another person’s voyeurism.

Upstairs was a different story. In the main atrium of the building, a space spanning an entire city block, was almost pitch dark. A low-placed spotlight illuminated a sheetless bed. The performers didn’t speak, but moved about the bed and its surrounding floor, making severe and sexualized contact with their fellow artists. Private became public here in a familiar yet always intriguing means of making a point, and making art. But that dark room elevated this performance and made it sad in a way, as if walking in on something you weren’t really supposed to.

Piles of shaved soap, part of "From the Fat Off Our Bones"

The domed mezzanine of the building housed the night’s celebratory piece. Two artists sat facing each other on a bench, purposely placed on a partial glass grid in the floor. The light showcased the long, curved shavings of soap they carved with and large metal peeler.

The scene was fascinating enough, made more so by the very soap being used to wash the feet of a few visitors. In the adjacent room, it is dark again. A few miniature wood houses are placed at eye-level, narrow slits cut into their façade to reveal televisions inside. A variety of scenes were on display involving complacent farm animals, vulnerable beings presented in silence, perhaps for the awe they render, and then becoming victims of horrid abuse. The meaning was most likely personal to each viewer, but the careful placement of these performances in conjunction with the space and lights I was shown made for a very compelling year of Site Unseen.

Martha Sarno -

Shaving soap in "From the Fat Off Our Bones"

The Chicago Cultural Center is transformed into a maze of performance exhibits, interlaced with installations and paintings, for a “Site Unseen 2009: Disabling Conditions.” Disability continues to be a relatively fragile topic of discussion, whether it is spoken, illustrated, painted or performed. Born illness, environmental illness, associations to the illness, commentary in all ways, interspersed through created galleries.

From the Fat Off Our Bones, a performance by James Kubie and Katrina Chamberlin, featuring Joseph Belknap address a different issue, death not disability. Together they operate as mediators for the living and attempt to elucidate our impending death.

A silencing dim light illuminates a pair seated at a bench. One male matched with one female peacefully and repeatedly carving a porcelain block mold as shavings mount soundlessly to their sides. What exactly they are carving is hard to tell, but the contents of my pamphlet share the secret. Slabs of soap, shaved to nothingness. Disrupted without commotion, a helper replaces the soap while they
continue to progress in this flowing motion.

One part of the video component of "From the Fat Off Our Bones"

A splinter of noise breaks away rough wooden frames to uncover more fragile porcelain soap, complimenting the fragile porcelain basin and pitchers, stationed throughout the space. Chicagoans are wordlessly invited to seat in the circular configuration of colorless benches surrounding the white apron clad attendants. They encourage the intrigued to remove shoes and socks for a ceremonial foot washing.

Beyond the circle, simply passing through a door, spa sighs clash with garish gasps. Soothing spa services transfer to bloodied butchery.

A disquieting absent light casts shadow on barn-like wooden structures enclosing offensively graphic imagery. I visit each housed film. A once gleeful leashed sheep makes way through a four-step documentary on its march toward murder. I search for meaning in this abrasive nightmare and am silenced like lambs in horror.

One part of the video component of "From the Fat Off Our Bones"

In this haunting exhibit, we are probed to “contemplate life, death, and fragile space between.” However, too many arguments presented by this trio of artists makes it nearly impossible to see the message and relation of one room to the next. Aside from the blatant religious undertones, this cryptic and disjointed narrative, at first glance, reflects Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle or simply put: vegan persuasion.

However, the artists say “If authentic images of death are distant from our everyday experiences, it is our processing of what remains that might bring us as a society closer to understanding these events.” Conversely, it brought me further away. This spa to slaughter transitory journey from life to death, body and spirit, is overwhelming and perplexing. I search for the invisible descriptors throughout the exhibit, but need to rely on my pamphlet to see their point of view. From dim light to no light, this original performance successfully captivates its willing audience.

Katrina Chamberlin (with James Kubie and Joseph Belknap) -

The fear of death can be a debilitating thing. It is part of the human condition – some of us pretend it will never happen, some of us see it daily. Even in its absence, death is always present/imminent and yet many of us choose not to notice. It is packaged in such a way that we miss it. ‘From the Fat Off Our Bones’, is part of an ongoing experience of the visceral that is so often distant from us. [DDET (more...)]

I eat meat.

I ate what I killed. I used the fat and bones to make tools for service. I did not waste the animal. For me there lies a huge element of responsibility. I wanted to be the one who slaughtered the sheep. I wanted to be present before and after. This is not vegan persuasion. The animal was slaughtered using standard methods of humane meat production. For me it is holding life and death in my arms and trying to grasp the impossible line between the two.

We expected the audience to be horrified at the footage of the slaughter. The videos are difficult to watch. They are the images that we pretend do not exist. Some audience members may have been overwhelmed by what they saw on screen and were unable to take in the live action in the next room as a result. Yet, it was crucial that the audience did experience the body. Like our hands holding the sheep as it died. Those who had their feet washed either unknowingly or willingly touched the animal slaughtered on screen. The warm water, the soft soap made with the sheep's own fat, and the soothing massage acted as a filter for the audience to be able to experience the animal, and thus experience death.

[DDET]

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Comments (3)

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1. erik wennemark says:
   November 30, 2009 at 2:36 pm

   whatever happened to letting the work speak for itself and damning the critics? while i think martha’s crit misses the mark slightly—had i spent more time on the piece in my essay i would have had different quibbles—writing something like, “Even in its absence, death is always present/imminent and yet many of us choose not to notice. It is packaged in such a way that we miss it.” really doesn’t serve the work. at all. parse that sentence a bit. what is left? nothing.

2. Kathryn says:
   November 30, 2009 at 2:57 pm

   Hey hey, easy easy.

   If we let the work speak for itself we’d just have photographers take pictures.

   I shudder to think what I’d find if I parsed 90% of my sentences 😅

   K

3. Julie Laffin says:
   November 30, 2009 at 8:10 pm

   A huge thank you to all the writers for their participation in Site Unseen. The reviews provided me with an additional window into the show since I was unable to attend this year’s iteration in spite of being the curator (an irony not lost on any of those involved!). My access to the actual event has been through the live video chat the evening of the show, videos and photos created in conjunction with it and anecdotal reports from participants and friends. I am very grateful to have this additional and very thoughtful layer to add to my ability to experience the work.

   I was moved that Erik was willing to share his own experience regarding his sister and show us what he saw through that very
personal lens. The varied perspectives of the writers was illuminating as well.

Julie Laffin

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