

ROBYN MAREE PICKENS

“Like the Throw of the Jacket”: An Integrated Exhibition at Blue Oyster 2016

“Language is rich when it is fed from difference. Where there is no difference there is no richness.”

Jeanette Winterson (1995, 64)

Let me know by next week, the title of the collaborative exhibition of six local artists at Blue Oyster, Dunedin in October 2016, is taken from Heather Jarvis’s exhibited poem-zine. One of the participating artists, Jarvis’s line comes from her extended poem that was presented as a typed, hand-bound zine, of which several copies were available for the duration of the exhibition. In a parallel gesture, the title of this essay, *Like the throw of the jacket*, is also taken from Jarvis’s poem-zine. As a line that recurs throughout the work, *Like the throw of the jacket* signals for Jarvis the importance of an event remembered, a moment captured, an aesthetic choice. Selecting *Like the throw of the jacket* as the title for this essay is an act of homage to Jarvis’s poem, and to the protocol that named the exhibition with the words of the typically marginalised, intellectually disabled artist (Jarvis). It is also an aesthetic choice. The jacket billowing in brief flight before slumping into its intended or unintended resting place is readily available to the mind’s eye. In that fleeting moment of suspension between the intended and unintended resting place, the thrown jacket also functions as a metaphor for the generally haphazard circumstances in which one is born (or becomes) labelled “artist” or “disabled artist.” In the act of billowing, the capacious flight of the jacket also captures and encompasses the expansive collaborative processes between Holly Aitchison, artist and educator at IDEA service’s Art Space (Dunedin), Chloe Geoghegan, director of Blue Oyster Art

Project Space (Dunedin), and six local artists: Saskia Leek, Darryl Breen, Ed Ritchie, Heather Jarvis, Desi Liversage and Kellie Shaw.

In an acknowledgement of the importance and politics of naming, my selection of *Like the throw of the jacket* as the title for this essay is a conscious alignment with the discourse of Critical Disability Studies, which operates under the activist banner “nothing about us without us” (Derby 2016, 103). As a newcomer to Critical Disability Studies I acknowledge my limited knowledge and experience of this discipline, whilst simultaneously suggesting that the ways in which we collectively think, act, and write about corporeal and cognitive difference is conditioned by the largely unchallenged rhetoric of ableism. It is the rhetoric and promulgation of ableist attitudes and practices that privilege and reify the able body/mind as the only body/mind against which all other bodies and minds are aberrant. It is the discourse and privileged value set of ableism that constructs the near-mythic idea of a perfect body/mind. It is this ideal that provokes the binary of able and disabled, and makes the discussion of disabled artists vulnerable to inequities of power and (mis) representation, particularly if the disabled artist is unable to give voice to their work in language understood by non-disabled, or other disabled persons. The rhetoric of ableism is embedded and encoded in language, in the very language I have just used in describing artists as “disabled.” More accurately, ableism is present in the *values* encoded in the language of “disabled” and “abled.”

Rather than focus on the ways in which “disability” has been constructed however, contemporary Critical Disability Studies focuses instead on ableism: on the privileging and subsequent instantiation of ableist attitudes and practices. As with other minority communities, disabled persons, and in this context, disabled artists, are faced with the challenge of drawing attention to ableist rhetoric on one hand, whilst reconfiguring a continually evolving, non-static, self and collective definition relevant to their



Figure 1. *Let me know by next week*, curated by Holly Aitchison, Blue Oyster, 2016.



Figure 2. *Let me know by next week*, curated by Holly Aitchison, Blue Oyster, 2016.

identity and presentation. It is the challenge of this essay to negotiate the relevant position of privilege from which I write (whilst rejecting the mythic perfect body/mind), being aware of my unrealised ableist attitudes, creating space for the voices of (particularly) the disabled artists, whilst resisting a re-entrenchment of the able/disabled binary.

This approach reflects the research of Fiona Campbell on ableism, which is predicated on two core notions: the aforementioned perfect body/mind, which Campbell describes as the *normative* and the *normative individual*, and the enforcement of an *able/not-able constitutional divide* (Derby 2016, 102). Following Alice Wexler and John Derby, this divide is founded on the medical model of disability, which “fails to honour disabled individuals’ embodied ways of knowing” (Wexler and Derby 2015, 128). And one could add disabled individuals’ *cognitive* ways of knowing. An able/not-able constitutional divide is simultaneously ever present and invisible depending on one’s level of ability/disability, or one’s awareness of “what it must be like” or “might be like” for a disabled person. Following a temporary illness or injury that impedes cognition, perception or mobility, the challenges of day-to-day life become relatively, if temporarily perceptible, to an otherwise self-identifying or ably-presenting individual.

A key strategy in Critical Disability Studies is the advancement of a continuum of ability/disability instead of a sharp binary. As the simple example of a temporary illness or injury suggests, or as Disability theorist John Derby highlights, the widespread use of spectacles, hearing aids, and psychopharmaceuticals clearly mitigates against the notion of a perfectly-abled individual (Derby 2016, 116). A continuum frame acknowledges that the majority of the population utilise a form of cognitive or corporeal assistance, including the stark reality of old age: that if one lives long enough the chances of body/mind impairment are significant and undeniable. A continuum of ability acknowledges the range of cognitive and corporeal abilities without the negative

charge of encoded values. To simply elide or discount the range of (dis)ability an individual experiences however, is a form of equally detrimental invisibilising. What would be helpful is a judgement-free model of inclusivity that is sensitive to the range of ability manifest in the human condition.

In such a light it is therefore appropriate to frame the collaborative exhibition at Blue Oyster as both an “integrated” exhibition involving six “local artists,” and to *positively* identify three of the artists (Darryl Breen, Heather Jarvis, Kellie Shaw) as intellectually disabled. It is because of the discrimination against disabled or differently-abled individuals stemming from the medical model of disability, that so much care has been taken in the framing of disabled artists in this essay. A relationship of care that was similarly evident in the moment of the exhibition’s opening, in the way the facilitators and artists spoke about the collaborative process, and in the media presentation of the exhibition.

If the task of speaking about the collaboration of disabled and abled artists is in its infancy, it is far easier to discuss the artwork of disabled artists as art in its own right. Where historically the art of disabled artists has been attached to individual diagnosis or framed by a normalising impetus, it is becoming increasingly common for the art of disabled artists to exist independent of defining association with cognitive or corporeal difference. I follow this approach when discussing the work of Breen, Jarvis and Shaw.

The artistic merit of Darryl Breen, Heather Jarvis and Kellie Shaw’s artwork was evident to artist and educator Holly Aitchison at Dunedin’s Art Space (run by IDEA services). In order to bring their work before a wider audience, Aitchison contacted the director of Blue Oyster, Chloe Geoghegan who co-facilitated what would become a unique, residency-style collaboration between painter Saskia Leek and illustrator Darryl Breen, emerging artist Ed Ritchie and poet/zine maker Heather Jarvis, and textile artist Desi Liversage and Kellie Shaw.

For the duration of the six-month sessions

between the pairs of artists, Aitchison assumed the role of curator, bridging and easing the process of collaboration. Over this six-month period, Leek, Ritchie and Liversage would visit Art Space on a weekly basis. The nature of the collaboration differed between the pairs, but all were attentive to the different collaborative dynamic without labouing the distinction. For Leek it was a process of observing, watching, and not being too invasive, for Ritchie it was a shared experience of routine, communication and friendship. After the initial catch up this pair then focused on their individual work due to personality and working preferences. As Kellie Shaw is both blind and intellectually disabled, Aitchison's curatorial pairing of Shaw with textile artist Desi Liversage was considered and insightful. Liversage describes procuring objects such as textiles, yarn, sticks, stones and shells that had a "compelling tactility." Liversage then had the "privilege" of observing Shaw's growing confidence of working with objects, and experience her role constructively diminish to someone who tied knots and collected supplies.

Following the Critical Disability Studies maxim of "nothing about us without us," I asked Breen, Jarvis and Shaw six questions drawing on Aitchison's skill and experience in the role of mediator. It is worth noting here, however, the distinct means of acquiring information from the six participants. With Leek, Ritchie and Liversage I was able to communicate directly with each artist by email and text message, whereas, in part due to time constraints, but equally related to the degree of independence, and proficiency in communication technology, I relied on Aitchison as an intermediary. In response to my question "What did you enjoy most about working with Desi (Liversage)?" Kellie Shaw's response was "I made a friend," suggesting that her interaction with Liversage was significant both socially and creatively. According to Shaw, wool has become more important in the way she makes art.

Liversage and Shaw began by handling the different natural objects and textiles Liversage brought to Art Space each week. Aware of the

work of Judith Scott, an artist who works with similar materials and methods, and is disabled, Liversage and Shaw proceeded to wrap the objects and textiles with wool. For the exhibition at Blue Oyster, Shaw created a cluster of parcel-like objects wrapped in wool that sat at the feet of vases filled with vertical wands of textiles, similarly wrapped in brightly coloured wool. This installation of textile art occupied the front of the main gallery near the windows. In an open-ended question regarding art-making Shaw stated: "I'm happy when I'm working because I like to use my hands. I can only see a little bit."



Figure 3. *Let me know by next week*, curated by Holly Aitchison, Blue Oyster, 2016.



Figure 4. *Let me know by next week*, curated by Holly Aitchison, Blue Oyster, 2016.

In response to the same open-ended question, Heather Jarvis replied: "I love writing poetry because it makes me feel special, it helps me deal with confusing questions." One of the most

distinctive features of Jarvis' poem-zine is the range of subjects she tackles. Interspersed amongst accounts of day-to-day happenings, Jarvis appears to confront, or be attuned to past events which she melds in the following example: "I am the woollen hat the raincoat and the mitten when I go to the Beach...and the Beachgrieving over the Mother." Her poetry is dappled with such compound words (above), and in the following instance: "...and the fire like the calling out of the fireblood and bone to the bone poem." Jarvis creates rich associative leaps evident in the following excerpt: "...and the faces white as the white cup and the white paint and the wedding dress the white crème egg and the cremebiscuit and black and white michaeljackson." Confident in her own practice, Jarvis answered "No" to the question: "Do you think you make art differently after working with Ed (Ritchie)?" yet as with Shaw, she expressed "excitement" over working with Ritchie. Ritchie and Jarvis shared the back gallery space with Jarvis' poem-zines arranged on a table with collages, and in the spirit of Jarvis's chosen medium, Ritchie wrote a poem of his own in large green letters directly onto the wall.

In the central space of the main gallery, Leek's collaboration with Breen, comprising a series of different-sized drawings, ranged over three walls. Breen both traces and draws pictures of animals, planets and lunar surfaces, and delicate, minimal landscapes. In many instances the lines that compose these figures are formed by many different colours-as-one, similar to the many-coloured wires that make up an electrical cable, but with shorter strands. In a candid evaluation of her role in the collaborative process Leek reflects that she may have underappreciated Breen's more minimal landscape works, yet it was Leek's compilation of several of Breen's drawings, enlargement of these to poster size, and the large orange and yellow "frames" painted directly onto the wall that may well have contributed to Aitchison's comment that Breen is more confident and purposeful in his art making. For Breen: "Making

art makes me feel good, helps me stay calm."

As far as Art Space and Blue Oyster are aware, *Let me know by next week* is the first formal, residency-style collaboration between artists who have inherited a tradition of being named as abled and disabled. According to all six artists the process was mutually important, enjoyable and productively creative. Dovetailing with Aitchison's aim for future exhibiting opportunities for artists like Breen, Jarvis and Shaw, is Saskia Leek's reflexive query: "It [Breen's notable reworking of a botched print job] made me wonder about what he would do to my paintings if I'd given them to him to work on, and how that would've changed the dynamic." Perhaps the next instalment of this type of collaborative project might find its direction in this reflection.