

Curatorial Statement by Julie Laffin

For the past five years, local artists have taken over the Chicago Cultural Center to present, *Site Unseen*, the annual one-night exhibition of installation and live art. This year, *Site Unseen*, will be centered around the theme of disability and will be presented on Monday, November 9th from 6-9 pm.

“Disabling conditions” as a concept for the 2009 show has emerged because the curator, Julie Laffin, has become increasingly disabled by environmental illness and complications from chronic Lyme Disease. Claire Geall Sutton’s ongoing commitment to accommodate Laffin’s diminished capacity for in-person involvement in the show has motivated her to find strategies that will enable them to continue their collaborative efforts to provide an annual platform for local artists producing non-traditional performance and media works. Last year, because Laffin was unable to be physically present, Dolores Wilber, was invited to co-curate the show and Claire Geall Sutton created a video document for Laffin which stood in as a surrogate for the experience Laffin was unable to participate in.

This year, as an expansion of their five-year collaboration, and as a celebration of their steadfast commitment to the project, *Site Unseen 2009* will feature works by local artists that bring visibility to issues presented by disabilities of all kinds.

The show is open to Chicago and vicinity permanent residents working with audio, performance and media installation art.

May I Have (Randolph Café)

Judith Harding in collaboration with Still Point Theatre Collective

An integrated ensemble of eleven performers with and without developmental disabilities, the first of its kind in Chicago, and perhaps in the United States, Harding and the Still Point Theatre Collective, will create a movement-centered piece in the Randolph Café area. The work addresses the issue of inclusion as well as the transparent barriers faced by adults with developmental disabilities. Within an installation context, couples in formal wear waltz in silence. Partners change in a light-hearted ritual at timed intervals and the performers' formal attire deconstructs until all are clothed in simple tee shirts and boxer shorts. According to Harding, “No matter what our disability, we all deal with life in our skivvies”.

Judith Harding is a writer / performer who lives with mental illness. With credits including Blue Man Group and Sesame St., Harding's solo works for theatre have achieved critical acclaim. For nine years she's taught voice, movement and theatre to folks of all ages with developmental disabilities and autism throughout the Chicago metro area. She and her students have composed and performed dozens of community-based performance events. Committed to bringing their work to a wider audience, Harding joined Still Point Theatre Collective last year.

Founded in 1993, Still Point is a community of artists who use performance to serve the needs of marginalized populations, celebrate our common spirituality and raise consciousness on the issues of peace and justice.

**Elevator Music (elevators Randolph Street side)
Unreal-estates (Annette Barbier and Drew Browning)**

Located in the elevator(s) adjacent to the grand staircase on the Randolph St. side of the Cultural Center, ***Elevator Music*** addresses varying approaches to disability (the medical model vs. politically centered identity consciousness) using writings, interviews and documentary sounds of disabled rights activists and the medical community. Spoken words are processed so that, while understandable, they become musical as well, cloaking what may for some be an uncomfortable message in an aesthetically pleasing form. So the elevator, a place of passage particularly adapted to the needs of the disabled, also becomes a site for the movement from definition by others to self definition.

Unreal-estates comprises Drew Browning and Annette Barbier, media artists whose work addresses issues of identity and the interdependence of the human and natural worlds. It is frequently site specific, and often uses the potential of new technologies to gather and represent information in new ways. More information about their work can be found at: <http://www.unreal-estates.com>

**shared body (Preston Bradley Hall)
Marissa Perel & Madeleine Bailey**

This site-specific performance-installation designed by Madeleine Bailey and Marissa Perel utilizes video, sound and sculpture to address survival and metamorphosis with/from disability touching on issues of confinement and exposure.

Due to her interdisciplinary approach to artistic practice Perel can be called a performance artist, though often she is cited as a choreographer or poet. Perel has a BA in Writing and Literature from Naropa University, and is currently working toward her MFA in performance at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She has been a guest-lecturer for the Chicago Dancemakers Forum and has performed at Elastic Arts and Epiphany Church as well as a number gallery and loft spaces. Marissa Perel has been involved with downtown dance, music, poetry and healing arts communities in New York since 2001. Her multifaceted therapeutic practices with her own disability have brought her many unique and intimate relationships within these communities.

Madeleine Bailey is an interdisciplinary artist and writer whose practice utilizes video, installation, drawing, and performance. Her work has been shown nationally and internationally and is included in the collections of Brown University in Providence, RI and the Centre International d'Art Contemporain in

Pont-Aven, France. She received a B.A. in both Visual Art and Literary Arts from Brown University and a M.F.A in Painting and Drawing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

**Fat Off of Our Bones (GAR Hall and Rotunda)
James Kubie and Katrina Chamberlin**

In Fat Off our Bones, James Kubie and Katrina Chamberlin act as intermediaries between the living and the event of death. Kubie and Chamberlin codify the visceral knowledge gained from slaughterhouse labor into a performance of service for the community. Through video and live performance, the audience experiences the slaughter and transition from body to soap, to bone china basins and to wool towels, culminating in an experience of foot washing in the GAR Rotunda and Hall.

Kubie and Chamberlin both have an endless fascination with the tenuous connections between anatomical tissue, cultural identity and the elusive spark of life, or soul. Their work is an attempt, if only because of the inherent possibility of failure, to capture something from the space between life and death, the body and the spirit, in order to bring it back to the community. They design procedures, equipment and tasks to work the body and the soul through the mechanics of religious ritual, physical labor, and surgical intervention. By performing this work of service to the community, the artists ask the audience, as well as themselves, questions about the function of labor, social belonging and the elusive connections between the spiritual identity and the material nature of the body. James is from Atlanta, Georgia and Katrina was born in Amsterdam and raised in Ankara, Turkey before moving to the United States for her studies. The two have been working together since becoming studio mates at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Site Unseen: The Project Onward Project (Project Onward Studio and 1st Floor Garland Court)

Project Onward is the Chicago Cultural Center's studio program for visual artists with mental and developmental disabilities. For *Site Unseen*, the visionary work of these artists comes to life in a series of live music and spoken-word performances, video projections, and multi-media projects in the First Floor Garland Room of the Cultural Center.

The Project Onward Project includes documentary footage of the artists and first-hand accounts of their experience, as well as large-scale projections of their visionary works. Selected artists will present live performance works, including Louis DeMarco's musical exploration of his imaginary world Loudemar, and a dramatic reading of David Blaisdell's original writings.

More information about Project Onward is at www.projectonward.org.

Mike Ervin is a writer and disability rights activist living in Chicago. His play *The History of Bowling* was produced at the Victory Gardens Theater in Chicago in 1999 and 2000, by the Know Theater Tribe in Cincinnati in 2001, by Mixed Blood Theatre in Minneapolis in 2002; by Circle Theater in Omaha in 2004, Hot City Theater in St. Louis in 2005 and NoHo Arts Center in North Hollywood, California in 2008 and University of Redlands in Redlands California in 2009. It also appears in the anthology *Beyond Victims and Villains: Contemporary Plays by Disabled Playwrights* (TCG, 2006). He also received playwright's fellowships from the Illinois Arts Council in 2001 and 2006. His other theater productions include *The Plucky and Spunky Show*, which he co-wrote with Susan Nussbaum. It was originally produced at the Remains Theatre in Chicago (1990).

By day Ervin is a free-lance journalist and has published over 1,000 articles and essays - mostly on disability topics - in more than 40 newspapers and magazines, including *the Chicago Tribune*, *the Los Angeles Times*, *the Miami Herald*, *Downbeat* and *the Progressive*. Since 1992, he has directed the Access Project, a comprehensive initiative to make live theater accessible for people with disabilities, at Remains Theatre and Victory Gardens Theater in Chicago.

Ervin is a founding member of the Chicago chapter of the direct action disability rights organization ADAPT. He is proud to have been arrested over a dozen times for civil disobedience. He is also founder of Jerry's Orphans, which organizes annual protests against the Jerry Lewis telethon.

Mike McGowan (poetry) was born in Jersey City on Woody Allen's 20th birthday, the same day Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat. His mother was watching a Marx Brothers' movie at the time. His father was a newspaper reporter who taught him not to believe everything he read. His mother, a daughter of Irish immigrants, raised 5 children, and is one of the kindest people you could meet.

He grew up near a popular Jersey shore resort in an era when children roamed free, families dressed for church, parents smoked cigarettes, drunks were funny, politicians got shot, vegetables came in rectangular frozen blocks, professional athletes had regular jobs in the off-season, and America learned again (and later forgot again) that the harder you try to defeat a determined enemy in their own country the more determined they get.

In his adult life, Mike mostly played in his 20's, married a beautiful actress and hung out with theatre people in his 30's, and focused most of his energy during his 40's on raising two smart and funny boys. A twist of fate, Parkinson's Disease, brought about early retirement in his early 50's (from a career he didn't

like all that much, anyway), and now, other than his family, he focuses his attention mostly on writing, photography and volunteer work. He and his family live in Oak Park, IL.

Debra Tolchinsky is a media artist with interests in video installation and documentary filmmaking. Her films, videos, and installations have been exhibited internationally at such venues as Croxhapox Gallery in Ghent, the Horse Hospital in London, the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., and The Chicago Cultural Center in Chicago, IL. She has also worked as an assistant film editor on such Hollywood features as *Searching for Bobby Fischer* and *The Doctor*. She was an artist-in-residence at the Portland Art Museum's Northwest Film Center, at Oxbow Art Colony in Michigan, and at the Vermont Studio Center in Vermont. She has received numerous awards including grants from The Center for Global Culture and Communication, The Center for Interdisciplinary Research in the Arts, and the SAIC Anderson Alumnae Fellowship Award. The Hollywood Motion Picture Sound Editors Guild nominated *Dolly* and *Lucky*, two of her video loops, for Golden Reel Awards, and she was a 2006 New Media Fellowship nominee, as part of the Rockefeller/Ford Foundation's Program in New Media. In 2008 Tolchinsky co-curated an exhibit on horror at Chicago City Arts Gallery, which will travel to the Dorsky Gallery in New York in 2009. Currently, she is developing a series of video pieces around the notion of "Smoke and Mirrors" while simultaneously directing a feature documentary about college debate.

Clover Morell is a Chicago based interdisciplinary performance artist and curator living with celiac disease. She recently received an MFA in Performance Studies from The School of The Art Institute of Chicago. Clover makes solo and group performances from assemblages of movement, writing and media. Her work utilizes collaborative methods to explore interpersonal dynamics, human behavior, somatic psychology, power and trauma and has been exhibited in Chicago at The Chicago Cultural Center, The Museum of Contemporary Photography, The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Museum, MOTO Restaurant, and abroad at The Prague Quadrennial (in collaboration with Julie Laffin). Clover is currently working on projects engaged with political and ephemeral street art, contemporary choreography and the making of maps through sensory experience.