

## The Grand Disability Arts Experiment Amanda Cachia, exhibition co-curator in the USA

*Art of the Lived Experiment* is an “experiment” in every sense of the word. This exhibition represents the first time that the Liverpool-based DaDaFest has toured one of their exhibitions overseas. The exhibition is also the outcome of Aaron Williamson’s first time curating a large group project. It is also the first time that I have co-curated an exhibition from a vastly different geographical location than my curatorial colleague, where my task has been to find synergy with, and expansion of, an already significantly developed cross-cultural rationale, rather than working collaboratively from the ground up. The exhibition is also the cornerstone of the inaugural DisArt Festival, the biggest experiment of all. To this end, I offer seven North American-based artists as a means of highlighting the aesthetic, philosophical, and conceptual choices found in Williamson’s selection, where there is a mix of extant and newly-commissioned works. The artists I have included are Jeremy Burleson, Raphaëlle de Groot, Wendy Jacob, Martin Kersels, Alison O’Daniel, Katherine Sherwood and Laura Swanson. How do these artists consider and reshape Williamson’s questions, where their, “own subjectivity can be incorporated, like the alchemist’s, into his or her work in new, experimental and challenging ways?”<sup>1</sup> I will continue to use this theme of “experiment” as a critical node for analysis throughout this essay, including notions of curatorial, artistic and political experimentation as it pertains to complex embodiment.

### Grand Rapids

In early 2013, I contacted DaDaFest Artistic Director, Ruth Gould, to express interest in working with her Festival in some shape or form. Ruth had outlined her interest in contracting me to help the Festival locate a USA-based



**Ellen Friis** *STELA*  
Installation view, the Bluecoat, Liverpool.

venue to host a first-time touring iteration of the *Art of the Lived Experiment* exhibit, which was commissioned and curated by Williamson for DaDaFest International 2014. As it happens, I knew that my friend Chris Smit was trying to mount the DisArt Festival in Grand Rapids, Michigan, for which he is Director, and it made sense to me to connect the two Festivals so they might find a generative partnership. As soon as I mentioned this idea to Chris, he was 100% on board, and he has been absolutely committed and unwavering in his excitement and belief in this unique union between an established, high-profile festival, and one that is fledgling and growing in momentum by the day. Owing to this fusion of energy and brilliance, *Art of the Lived Experiment* is now being launched in the USA in Grand Rapids, and is jointly being presented at the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts, Kendall College of Art and Design of Ferris State University, and the Grand Rapids Art Museum, from April 10 — July 31, 2015. I am very happy to be curating a small add-on component to the *Art of the Lived Experiment* exhibition, where seven North America-based artists will join Aaron's nineteen-person-strong collection of international talent. It is a pleasure to be co-curating *Art of the Lived Experiment* with Aaron in the USA.

### Curatorial Experimentation

When I learned more about Aaron's concept for *Art of the Lived Experiment*, the first thought I had was to consider how my artistic selections would simultaneously connect and expand his exhibition's overarching theme. Aaron had developed a dynamic and very flexible rationale that appeared to liberate disability arts exhibitions from their usual frameworks and discourses. By this I mean that Aaron was interested in thinking about disability from the perspective of an experiment — indeed, he called it an

“uncertain rationale.”<sup>2</sup> For the few disability-related exhibitions that emerge, from time to time, curators typically rely on the medical model in which to frame their projects. Flowing from this pathological discourse, we might see exhibitions that explore the reductive historical representation of disabled bodies, where disability was “experimented on,” within the hospital, the lab, or the stage, in “freak shows” and carnivalesque performances. Exhibitions that use the social model of disability are still relatively new, and while Williamson claims to rely on the social model as a foundation for his work here, I'd argue that he is ultimately moving beyond the social model. Through *Art of the Lived Experiment*, he is attempting to take a side-step from the burden of ghettoizing terminology and assumptions that typically cloud disability. Williamson says in his essay in the original *Art of the Lived Experiment* publication, reproduced in this volume: “*Art of the Lived Experiment* explores this question, not through the fixed securities of autobiography or illustration, but through a more immediately compelling emphasis: by acknowledging that just as the unfixed, mutable nature of existence demands constant adjustment and experiment, so does making art. The exhibition addresses the idea that both art and life are subject to flux and transformation. In both realms, all that is certain is continual change. Experiment is necessary in order to process, alter, combine and transform conditioning elements, since nothing in life or in art can be permanent.”<sup>3</sup> Aaron's ideas have inspired me to experiment as a curator, and thus I approached the artists and my selections of their work with a playful and very open attitude. The work that you see here is not only about attempting to transform reductive ideas about disability in society at large, but is also about motivating personal change and transmutation in the lives of the individual artists in this show, within the audience members who engage

with the exhibit, and in me, as the exhibition's collaborating curator. Each work in *Art of the Lived Experiment* is compelling in its lively transmutation, as vital as the individual disabled body itself, and the rich, subjugated knowledge it offers us. While there is a component to the exhibition that might suggest that perhaps a disabled person's life is an experiment by virtue of their ingenuity in "overcoming" barriers, I am careful to avoid using this terminology.

I decided to think of the artist's contributions from a conceptual standpoint first and foremost. This means that some of the artists may not directly identify with "disability." However, the artists are open to including their work in this enterprise, and to being contextualized in this way. For several artists, this is completely new terrain that offers the promise of the very transformation of which Aaron speaks.

### **This Publication**

This iteration of the *Art of the Lived Experiment* publication follows closely from its predecessor. This publication is not a catalog, for it aims to reveal the process of the art-making, rather than end product. In some instances, however, we have given artists the opportunity to show both process and product side by side. The publication also includes installation shots from the show in Liverpool as a mode of documentation or archive. Given that the parameters for the style of my curatorial essay have also shifted and expanded, I would like to focus on several key conceptual and political aspects of the show that have emerged for me over the past few months that I think are worth noting. Again, these aspects continue to fall within a discourse of "experimentation." The structure of my essay also closely follows on the heels of Williamson's original essay, and might be considered as a sort of addendum.

### **Politics of Self-Representation**

Jeremy Burleson is an artist with an intellectual or developmental disability who makes beautiful sculptures and drawings from his base at the National Institute for Artists with Disabilities (NIAD) in Richmond, California. For *Art of the Lived Experiment*, Burleson is giving us his theatrical installation of sculptures, *Lamps*, which is installed in the hallway area of the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts. Burleson's lyrical lamp shapes, made of tightly-rolled paper (and sometimes painted), are designed to hang from the ceiling. Burleson's lamps emphasize the symbolism of transmutation and the illumination of ideas and energy which will stretch far and wide across the city of Grand Rapids, for his lamps will be visible from the streets, glowing brightly at night, and sparkling throughout the day. Nine drawings by Burleson will accompany the lamps, which offer idiosyncratic renderings of objects drawn from nature that continue to inspire him, ranging from rainbows, to cactus plants with sharp spikes.

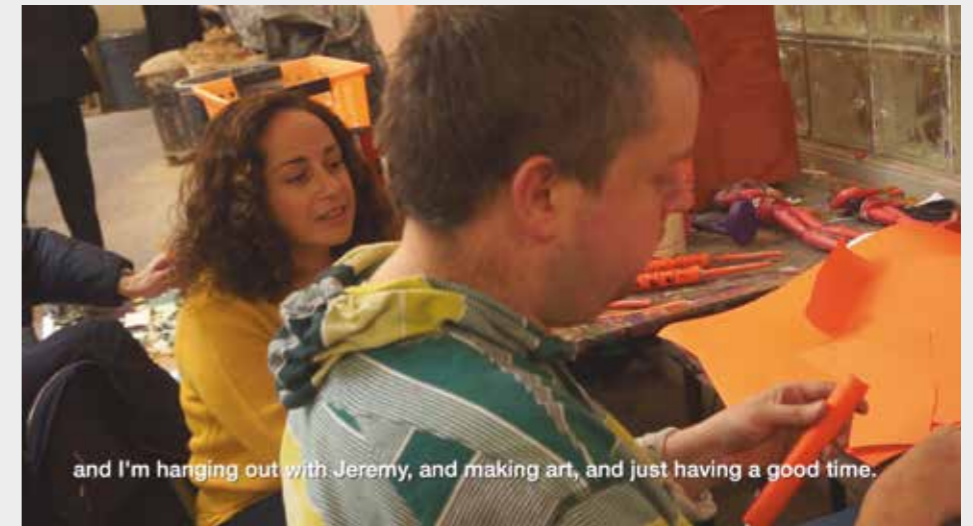
A special component to Burleson's installation will be a video interview that I conducted with the artist at NIAD on December 30, 2014, in collaboration with a Berkeley videographer and editor, Shari Paladino. Burleson is unable to be physically present in person at the opening of the *Art of the Lived Experiment* exhibition in April as he has a fear of public spaces and sidewalks, but I was keen to still have his presence felt in some way throughout the duration of the exhibition. We decided that filming an interview between Jeremy and the curator would be of benefit, so that the interview could accompany his work and be displayed on a flatscreen television attached to the wall. Visitors will then be able to experience my engagement with Jeremy and come to know him a little better through my own intimate encounter with him.



Over the course of two hours, my time with Burleson at NIAD was one in which we shared much physical contact, ranging from the holding of hands to the scratching of his back, which he apparently loves. Burleson often asked me a question over and over again, and several times he asked me to retrieve a certain material, ranging from paper to tape. I was happy to assist him.

I was inspired by a similar interview that was conducted with Burleson by self-identifying physically disabled artist Sunaura Taylor, as part of the video, *CREATE: The Artists Are Present*, produced and directed by Katherine Sherwood in 2011. This video was developed as a reaction to the lack of self-representation by the artists in the exhibition of the same name, co-curated by Lawrence Rinder and Matthew Higgs for the Berkeley Art Museum. The curators had failed to consult with the artists during the planning of the show, as they claimed that the artists “couldn’t speak,” and because of this, I believe they neglected their professional curatorial duty. Instead, they relied on the staff of the art

centers where the artists worked to facilitate the loans of the artworks, comfortably avoiding any direct interaction with the artists themselves. Amongst others, Taylor interviews Burleson in this video, who was in this *CREATE* exhibition, in order to give him opportunity to speak in his own way, even if that voice was, and is, non-verbal and atypical. Sherwood’s intervention, which I hope I have emulated, comes in light of a recent article that I authored in the journal *Museums*



& *Social Issues*, entitled “From Outsider to Participant: Developmentally Disabled Dialogue in Socially Engaged Art,” where I support Sherwood’s actions, and advocate for the importance of hearing the developmentally disabled artist’s voice in the space of a gallery or exhibition.<sup>4</sup> It seems to me that this is part of the important work that a curator must do in working with disability arts. If we are to turn toward the DaDaFest manifesto, then the curator’s role can most definitely become politicized by his or her actions toward implementing social justice. Through demonstrating new best practices such as the inclusion of Burleson’s atypical voice in contemporary art exhibits (even while admitting that his inclusion might still be considered “tokenistic”), I hope to provide a template moving forward for how disabled artists can transition beyond their ostensible outsider status into a realm where they are equal and powerful participants.

### **Capturing the North American Experiment**

Other modes of experimentation evident in the works that have been added to *Art of the Lived Experiment* range from Raphaëlle de Groot’s making/unmaking, transformation and wondering in *Off* (2015), which often lead to disoriented walks in her performance-based practice. Most of these performance works involve long transformative actions where the artist manipulates a stock of materials without the use of sight. The artist experiments with the very state of being lost, and eventually finds her way in a given space. Wendy Jacob has mapped the “waves and signs” of Grand Rapids working in conjunction with local musicians to offer a unique and exciting vibrational compendium as charted through a spectacular 6’ weather balloon designed to specifically engage local deaf and non-deaf audiences. Martin Kersels calls attention to the relationship of the

body to the outside world — things, spaces, and other people — and the ways that physicality and psychology are intertwined, through his *Flotsam* series of drawings (2010—2011) and the sculpture, *Charm (Party Clown)* (2010). Alison O’Daniel grapples with the potentials and intersections of images, captions, and sounds together. Like the Williamson-inspired alchemist, here, O’Daniel similarly works with metal, but instead of attempting to turn this into gold, her materials come to symbolize sound, narrative and other abstract qualities that disrupt traditional modes of access so as to privilege communication strategies by various subjects. The artist illustrates how her subjects might receive and translate sonic information in innovative ways. Katherine Sherwood has painted and collaged odalisque figures on a cloth support made from found reproductions of famous paintings. The artist has appropriated art historical images of the female nude in order to challenge canonical and ableist ideals of beauty. Consider that the nude figure “at rest,” pensive (like a Greek philosopher), is disabled. One wears a brace, and one has a cane — “disability objects” that imitate Sherwood’s own brace and cane. This critical transmutation is further challenged by replacing the faces with images of the brain, which is also a central motif in Sherwood’s work, where she typically uses scans of her own after she experienced a stroke in 1997. Laura Swanson’s *Uniforms* (2015) are 4 foot tall, life-sized, custom-made mannequins that wear protective or spiritual uniforms, which consist of a beekeeper, burqa, plague doctor, shaker cloak, mourning dress, welder, and fencer. The mannequins are accompanied by framed studio portraits, which depict Swanson wearing the uniforms in front of digitally composited backgrounds of photos found online. According to the artist, this work, “explores a desperate aspiration for agency and privacy...” as one who lives with dwarfism.<sup>5</sup>

### Another note on ‘Disability’

In Williamson’s essay, he spoke of his own identity as being *differently-able* and his frustrations with how the differences between impairment and disability were often widely misunderstood. I have always identified with the social model of disability too, where I am disabled by society’s perceptions of my own dwarfism. To say that it is complicated is an understatement. As part of my research for writing this essay, I decided to interview each of the artists and ask them how they felt about the language of disability. The responses were mixed. Kersels said that he understood disability to mean how our bodies were constantly being judged according to a standard.<sup>6</sup> Swanson expressed how she generally preferred to avoid the term, given that it was a narrow means in which to identify people, although she understands she needs to use the term on occasion in order to make her ideas clear within a theoretical context.<sup>7</sup> O’Daniel, too, said she did not like the word, but explained that she felt that maybe it was necessary to, “label and name the myriad of experiences that people have... everyone has a disability of some sort — be it physical, emotional, spiritual, locational... I find it lovely to watch people navigate and shape their lives around the attributes they have.”<sup>8</sup>

The exhibition’s précis of a disabled person’s life as a “lived experiment” also superimposes onto notions of “lived experience” without sliding too quickly into mere autobiography. Recounting one’s personal “lived experiences” has largely been embraced by academics who work in the field of disability studies in North America. The phenomenology of lived disability experience is important because the body itself becomes a sign of political discourse — the body has political objecthood that has power to demonstrate certain truisms about the world in which we live, or at least, to

destabilize what we may have previously thought as universally true for a range of human subjects. Maureen Connolly and Tom Craig critically state that, “Working with the body as a sign of political discourse allows us to examine how disability, stressed embodiment, and bodily contingency transgress the logics and inscriptions of a culture based in ableism, capitalism, and normative productivity.”<sup>9</sup> In this way, they are outlining that much of our perceptions of shared understanding, perceiving and sensing of the world are actually based on cultural ideals of a “normal” healthy body. This critical distance can be overcome and even removed by looking at the personal experience and the anecdote in order to shed light on alternative experiences and educate us to new modes of being.

### Moving Forward with Experimental Exhibitions & Festivals

All of this is to say that I am convinced that even though our disability arts festivals’ frameworks are fraught with deeply embedded political, ideological and ontological sensitivities, we must make a pledge towards continuing the very experimentation that Williamson and myself, and the artists, offer here through *Art of the Lived Experiment*. By professing our experimentation upfront, first and foremost, then we also admit that any outcome is uncertain, like the exhibit’s rationale. But exhibitions that seek to unravel any “aesthetic and political certainties” tied to complex corporeality are inherently important given our belief that disability must be recognized as an important framework in which to consider artistic theory and praxis.<sup>10</sup> As Laura Swanson says, “Being an artist allows me to imagine what is possible and build my own world with my own rules,” especially when those rules don’t apply to you.<sup>11</sup> Experimenting, questioning, and transforming are all second nature to Swanson, given she had to figure out ways to adapt and reconsider physical

and philosophical challenges from an early age. We hope that this exhibition is an accessible and yet challenging turning point, a milestone, a template and a precursor to the next chapter in disability arts exhibits, festivals and other related forms of radical artistic production.

- 1 Aaron Williamson, "Art of the Lived Experiment." DaDaFest 2014 publication. Liverpool: DaDaFest and the Bluecoat, 2014.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Amanda Cachia, "From Outsider to Participant: Developmentally Disabled Dialogue in Socially Engaged Art," *Museums and Social Issues: A Journal of Reflective Discourse*, Volume 9, No. 2, Fall 2014.
- 5 Laura Swanson interview with Amanda Cachia, January 8, 2015.
- 6 Martin Kersels interview with Amanda Cachia, January 5, 2015.
- 7 Laura Swanson interview with Amanda Cachia, January 8, 2015.
- 8 Alison O'Daniel interview with Amanda Cachia, January 9, 2015.
- 9 Maureen Connolly and Tom Craig, "Stressed Embodiment: Doing Phenomenology in the Wild" in *Human Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 25th Anniversary Issue (2002), 456.
- 10 Aaron Williamson, "Art of the Lived Experiment." DaDaFest 2014. publication. Liverpool: DaDaFest and the Bluecoat, 2014.
- 11 Laura Swanson interview with Amanda Cachia, January 8, 2015.

**Ellie Collins** *Haptic Object*  
Installation view, the Bluecoat, Liverpool.

