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Dispatch

Interview with David Bobier

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Esther Ignagni, a researcher with the *Cripping the Arts* project, interviewed disability artist and cultural producer David Bobier about his many years of experience with "cripping the arts." This is an excerpt from their interview. Bobier subsequently added a few comments to the interview transcript to contextualize his thoughts within the current moment of the pandemic.

Esther Ignagni: How does the theme of "cripping the arts" intersect with your identity as an artist?

David Bobier: I've always worked in the realm of sound but over the last 10 years I've started to consider the multi-sensory experience of art as more important. I've recently become aware of what I am doing as a kind of "cripping process." I think to some extent cripping drives my work. But there's a balance; the way I work is intuitive and instinctive. I've always been – even as a child I remember being – very sensitive to my environment, specifically outdoors, in the natural environment and to the taste and smell of things. That's always sort of been my way of experiencing the world. As my work has progressed recently, I'm certainly more aware of sound and vibration. I'm also considering things like smell as having some sort of a resonance that you can share with people in some way or another.

Esther Ignagni: How do you see that as "cripping the arts?"

David Bobier: I think that's a valid question and I probably need to think about that for my own interest. I think that when we're cripping the arts, we are taking the obvious or taking what we experience "normally," or what a

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normative body might experience, and emphasizing, or re-emphasizing, or re-examining it in some way or another. I think the whole thing for me – because I work with the vibrotactile a lot – is that I really think of vibration as a language, as a way of communicating, beyond its relationship to sound. So, it's about a different language for me. I think about questions such as how do I make that language, how do I communicate through that language?

Questioning the elements of what I think of as language is the basis of what I am trying to explore. I mean, you can talk about music and yes, it is a language, it's a very rich and emotional kind of language. So, for me, it's going that one step further to that very fundamental source of language and exploring how people respond to it. And because we experience language physically, I also ask: what parts of the body are more responsive? Who is more responsive than others? You know, all those sorts of interactive things. I rely very heavily on my audience to activate the work, to control the work to some extent, or to participate in it, but also to get some sense of how they're experiencing the process and what they're getting out of it.

Esther Ignagni: When did you first encounter disability and Deaf arts?

David Bobier: Well, I came to encounter Deaf art because both of my children are Deaf. So, I'm going to say 28 years ago, when we adopted my son. At that point, we approached our children's deafness following the cultural route and not the mainstream route, which was challenging. We wanted our kids to be part of the cultural Deaf community. That meant we had to adapt to them and learn the language, American Sign Language (ASL), as well as be present in Deaf social events and activities. This was a very foreign and uncomfortable and awkward experience initially because I wanted it to work right away.

But it doesn't work that way. You know, at that point, I didn't identify as hard-of-hearing although I did have some hearing issues. But I certainly wasn't recognized as being part of the Deaf community. It was through an exhibition that I did way back in the mid-90s that really helped me connect, and people from the Deaf community responded to what I was doing. Prior to that, I was really just seen as a hearing parent trying to raise two Deaf children. And within Deaf culture, that poses problems and challenges. So, I put on this exhibition about understanding Deaf culture and language. It was called *Signing On: Adopting a Cultural Perspective*, and it travelled. It was, hm, let me see who sponsored it... oh! Macintosh Gallery at Western University in London and then it went to Chatham, where else did it go? Chatham, Kitchener (pause) (laughs) oh! Brantford! So, it travelled, and was able to get some Deaf attendance.

We had interpreters of course for the opening, but it was still very early in the development of what we now recognize as Deaf/disability arts. We actually have a catalogue and a video from that exhibition. Dale Barret, a Toronto-based artist at the time, was cognisant of the material that I was

trying to present, and he wrote a great essay. Heather Gibson and Anita Small added an essay on Deaf culture and then we did an interview with two Deaf teachers, Debbie Friesen and Odette Screpnek, around the educational perspective. So, I look back now, and I think it's a pretty important exhibition and project, it certainly predates a lot of what is going on now.

Yeah, so out of that experience I became more involved. I worked as the Director of Development for Toronto International Deaf Film and Arts Festival with Catherine McKinnon. And I was doing a bit of work with the Deaf Culture Centre in Toronto, and then ... I think I've forgotten your question (laughs).

Esther Ignagni: When you first encountered disability and Deaf art?

David Bobier: Oh, yeah. So, my kids attended Robarts School for the Deaf in London. We were living in New Brunswick at the time and I was teaching at Mount Allison.

Esther Ignagni: Oh! I didn't know that.

David Bobier: Yeah, and I had to break my tenure and leave the position because there were no services for Deaf people in the area. Well, there was a school for the Deaf in Amherst, which is just across in Nova Scotia, so we thought we were fine ... and then they decided to close the school. I was on sabbatical when that happened. So, the alternative was for the kids to go to school in Halifax in a residential program, which we weren't necessarily poised for. The distance from where we were in Sackville, New Brunswick was not possible. So, I resigned, and we moved back to Ontario during the NDP era. That's when Gary Malkowski was the first Deaf Member of Parliament and schools were recognizing ASL as a language of education. So that was beginning to take place in provincial schools. So, the kids went to the Robarts School for the Deaf in London, Ontario. And of course, there were kids with all ranges of disabilities. I volunteered there incessantly... I was practically there every day! (laughs) At one point, they gave me a classroom to set up a studio space. So, I interacted with the staff and kids all the time.

At that time there was a festival in Chicago, a Deaf children's festival, and we would always send the students' works and they would do well. We would take the students to this festival and that's when I became more familiar with the scene and De'VIA [Deaf View/Image Arts] was just coming out. I was also going to Deaf congresses in Montreal and stuff like that, just trying to grab as much information and experiences as I could (laughs).

In my art practice at this time, I was often taking things apart. I did an exhibition when I was out East that was based on connecting with machines, I guess you'd say, but mostly domestic things – vacuum cleaners, fans, and stuff like that. I actually created work using those objects. In one piece I think

I had eight industrial fans which I put on steel pedestals so that they became almost like a tuning fork in a sense. There was an arrangement of eight of them, tiered, sort of like a chorus. In front of the fans there was a podium that the audience could go up to and switch the fans on and off and so you could create your own sort of sound composition by whichever fans you had turned on or off. This also provided the tactile experience of the cool air on your body created by the movement of the fans, thus adding to my investigation of the multi-sensory. I would record the interior sounds of the fans. It's an interest, I guess, in what sound is and to what extreme you can take it, without annoying people too much.

More recently I was commissioned to do an installation for the PanAm games in Hamilton with Centre[3] for Artistic and Social Practice. I researched demographics of Deaf athletes and then I had phrases like, "what percentage of people with disabilities actually have access to sports*"* and things like that translated into Braille. Then, the Braille became my sound composition through the use of music box devices: I punched out a negative version of the Braille on the paper strips that fed through the music boxes. So, when you play it, the Braille becomes sound.

Esther Ignagni: I love it!

David Bobier: So, these are strips, like a film, that rotate through the music box as the audience turns a small crank. This object with the music box on top is facing a wall or a projection screen and there is a light shining out of the object onto the wall. The perforated strip passes down in front of the shining light, so the Braille becomes a moving light image. And then all of this comes back through into a vibrotactile system. In some versions of the installation, you might experience this while sitting in a school desk that is being activated by the vibrotactile system. Braille sound is actually becoming vibrotactile again. I've installed this in floors, too. So, you're standing on the floor and the Braille becomes a tactile experience in your feet. I've just finished two more of these pieces using wooden hands – you know, you get them from artist stores. I've placed transducers on each fingertip so that they're gesturing, and the vibration is coming out of the fingertips. So, you can put your hand on the wooden hand and actually feel the Braille back on your fingertips.

Esther Ignagni: Who are your audiences for your work?

David Bobier: Typically, art gallery or museum audiences, which is a very white, Anglo-Saxon, colonial-influenced audience. I think that's changing a little bit, because of funding and because of the recognition that the Deaf-Disability arts movement is starting to get. I think there's a will to disrupt the homogeneity of Canadian arts, but I think you're working with institutions and systems that are resistant to change. I would guess this is the case even

within the academic community. So, that's the audience for the most part. But I'm finding that to be shifting. For instance, with the VibraFusionLab exhibition we had in Montreal, as part of the *VIBE: Challenging Ableism and Audism Through the Arts* symposium, which had 150-200 audience members from across the Deaf … Deaf and Disabled community. This was brilliant because that's the audience we want to bring in and make comfortable. I tend to consider who is missing in our audiences and who is missing as artists and really address this in how my work evolves and in its presentation. This is challenging but that's the challenge we need to address. When I am working in the studio on new works, I am always conscious of how many different ways the work can be experienced: by sight, by sound, touch, by smell. To me, the more sensorial ways you can communicate through the work, the more enriching the audience experience and the more potential the work has for reaching out to a more diverse audience. Communication in my work is the key; the more modalities a work encompasses the more opportunities there are to engage with the work by people of all abilities. Everyone benefits, of course, but it is really my concern that I can connect with those from the Deaf and disability communities. In my work through VibraFusionLab, I devote a great deal of energy toward access to the arts as well as creating support and resources for Deaf and disabled artists in their own artistic production.

I also think a lot about kids in my work. You know, most artwork, unless it's specifically designed for children, doesn't really consider children as an audience because they might touch it, first of all, and damage it or something, right? So, I like to break down those kinds of barriers around art experience.

I'm also wary of my body and how to try and keep it as healthy as possible. Certainly, I don't have the range of physical (laughs) um, strength I guess, or ability that I used to have. But I'm a fairly high-energy person so, you know, I keep active. I think, maybe this is a circuitous route to answering the question but access to other people is important for generating and instilling excitement for each other, to support each other. There's the old myth that artists are antisocial and (laughs) and I think we all go through that periodically but coming together has given me a lot of personal strength.

Esther Ignagni: What do you think we could do to make the arts more accessible in Canada?

David Bobier: When I think of "we," I think about our community. I think about the enormous amount of passion and work that is being done. The passion is incredible. I've spent a fair bit of time in the UK in the last three or four years, just talking to people about what it was like when the Deaf and disability arts movement was starting there, 30 years ago. It was a very different beginning because it was politically based. It was not just art focused; it was a full disability rights movement.

We are seeing enormous growth in Deaf and disability arts here in Canada now, too. We are seeing a much more unified movement with projects stretching across the country. Politically, we are seeing a surge of activism in and through the arts. This is supported, of course, by targeted funding from the Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council, and the British Council Canada and this is starting to filter down to available funding through some of the larger municipalities. Marginalized voices in general are gaining some recognition under the dark clouds of the pandemic, but will these voices be allowed to prevail as we move forward. I feel there is a door of great opportunity open to us right now. My hope is that this movement of Deaf and disability arts will also find a unique and valued place of its own.

I think we are generating visibility from our art, whether it's through theatre, performance, the visual arts or through critical writing, academic publishing, curatorial practice, as well as through journals and smaller publications, which circulate disability arts in the public.

There's also this whole conversation around "do we want to be part of the mainstream arts culture?" Personally, I don't think we want to be mainstream. We want our identity to be what it is. We are struggling to find our place within the mainstream conversation, but I think there is more openness. I'm optimistic we will find our place.

Some of the symposiums have been just amazing, like *Cripping the Arts*. What I like about them is that you're in a room where everybody's on the same page. There's no hierarchical stuff going on. Everybody has an understanding of what we're experiencing as a starting point for the conversation. I've spent years trying to explain, what is Deaf culture or that ASL is a language and in these spaces, that's already a given for everyone. I feel very close to the community. I have never felt that as strongly before in the arts. So, let's keep those symposiums going and other opportunities for gatherings too. We need to be together again post-Covid!