



Dispatch

Reflexive Sketches during the *Crippling the Arts Symposium*

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Figure 1. The future is accessible (“The Future is Accessible” is a T-shirt and social media campaign by Annie Segarra, an American YouTuber, artist, and activist for LGBT and disability rights).

Image description: A collage of four line-drawings from *Crippling the Arts*. The first sketch pictures a pencil with the word “journalism” written across it, a person’s torso, their arms

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holding a device, two faces looking at a screen and clouds above their heads and the word “media” written among the clouds in capital letters. One cloud is broken in two sections; one side says “dis” and the other side says “ability.” The second sketch pictures line drawings of a row of six stick-like figures, each with a raised fist. Below this are the words, “new revolution” in cursive writing. The third sketch pictures a landscape with water, land, and a tree. In the foreground, in the lower left corner, are two people’s heads. The fourth sketch pictures a person and a large thought bubble that says, “future is accessibility.” Below the thought bubble is the word “dream” written in capital letters.

Introduction

In this dispatch, I share a combined form of written text and sketches reflecting my thoughts as a culturally Deaf attendee at the *Crippling the Arts Symposium*.¹ First, I discuss the layout of a panel with an audience. Second, I reflect on how the layout enables me to understand the meaning of “cripping” as an act aligned with social justice in relation to the arts, which in turn influences my perspective on the following themes: future, leadership, and representation. Finally, I conclude by considering the necessity of openness towards accessibility and social change and the full inclusivity of Deaf, disabled, and mad artists and artworks in the Canadian arts.

As a culturally Deaf artist with an interpretive dance background, I was honoured to participate in the *Crippling the Arts Symposium* as an audience member. I got to meet various arts researchers, artists, advocates, and others. I could not help but smile because of the sense of belonging I felt. Not only was there a crowd of culturally Deaf artists and artists with disabilities, including those who experience madness,² but Symposium attendees included people who thrive in new revolutionary thinking around the arts. Together, we were people who practice social justice with a sense of intersectionality regardless of our walks of life. The Symposium offered artful programming and ways to bring society’s attention to disability and intersecting issues that have been long ignored or forgotten – be it cultural difference (e.g., Deaf, language), race, or economic or social status.

Upon entering a large room filled with round tables and chairs, I chose to sit in the first row in clear view of the stage where I could see the panel of presenters, as well as the American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters. I looked around and noticed the way the tables were laid out: set a few steps apart, yet so close and chairs were placed next to each other. This made me feel close to people, literally and figuratively, as if they were visually

¹Crippling the Arts Symposium is a place where individuals who are part of the Deaf and Disability art and activism community come together for three days. During these days, we collaborate and explore how our individual and collective contributions affect changes in our society in terms of social justice using a political arts lens: rights, language, culture and power.

²“Mad” is a term of self-identity used by some people “who have experienced mental distress and/or use the mental health system” (Crippling the Arts Access Guide, 2019, p. 22; <https://tangledarts.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/cta-access-guide-spreads-digital.pdf>).

accessible to me to reach out to. As allies. The scenario was remarkable: We were allies at round tables, and the many seats represented people offering different but shared perspectives on *cripping*. Artists, researchers, contributors, and other types of attendees were in the room, at the table, discussing the meanings of crippling the arts. Incredible.

We were all being asked: “What does Crippling the Arts really mean to you? What is “cripping?”



Figure 2. Allies and intimacy.

Image description: A collage of two-line drawings from *Crippling the Arts*. The first sketch pictures the same drawing as above: a pencil with the word “journalism” written across it, a person’s torso, their arms holding a device, two faces looking at a screen and clouds above their heads and the word “media” written among the clouds in capital letters. One cloud is broken in two sections; one side says “dis” and the other side says “ability.” The second sketch pictures 14 small circles across the page and the words “allies + intimate” on top of the circles.

Some of us were familiar with “cripping” and could easily describe it in relation to arts and culture. Some of us needed to take a pause and quietly ponder. I took in a lot of information from panelists and people I met at CTA and had to take a long pause to analyze what it means to me.

I am a dance artist, and whenever I stand before a person or an audience, I know I experience and embody an intersection of identities that I cannot and will not let go of. I stand firmly and commend: Yes, I am Black. I am visually coloured. I choose to see this as a privilege. Yes, I am Woman. I identify with woman and I choose to hold my head up knowing how strong I am and can be. And yes, I am Deaf. I use American Sign Language and choose not to speak. Through my art practice, I voice through body movements that tell stories however people wish to perceive them. I often break audio-centric audiences' expectations by not including music, offering them eerie silence, and forcing them to actually use their eyes to critically observe and interpret my body-movement stories.

Like others, I seek to educate my community about invisible and visible oppressions including audism,³ racism, and sexism. Rather than withering away as many oppressed people are expected to do, I dance radically so that people from all walks of life see what I see and feel what I feel – to give that perspective. Crippling the arts means to me a new revolution. It promotes action and creativity that in turn reclaims space in the arts in order to be seen (and heard).

Everyone in the room agrees that arts can change the world.

The Future, Leadership & Representation

Crippling does not necessary mean rebelling against society. Crippling intends to shake society awake from a creative and social justice slumber and recognize our individual abilities and how we can contribute fresh knowledge, experience and compassion to our futures. Not theirs, ours. We are society's leaders because we experience all kinds of barriers that non-Deaf and non-disabled people often do not experience. The "FUTURE" panel from the Symposium argued that our rights and our sense of ownership over our lives and our creative practices gives us an important place in our society. We are all part of an interdependent and interconnected community. Like the room in my drawing and reflection above: we all deserve a seat at the table.

We are allies. We all have our own perspectives, and we represent a diverse collective of people who are culturally Deaf, disabled, and mad, regardless of our gender, sexual orientation, and so forth. Diversity = intersectionality. Our differences challenge us to think deeply about how to shift away from normative perspectives, and at the same time build upon our relationships with our allies to move towards embracing social justice.

³ Audism refers to "discrimination against D/deaf or hard of hearing people" (*Crippling the Arts: Access Guide*, 2019, p. 20; <https://tangledarts.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/cta-access-guide-spreads-digital.pdf>)

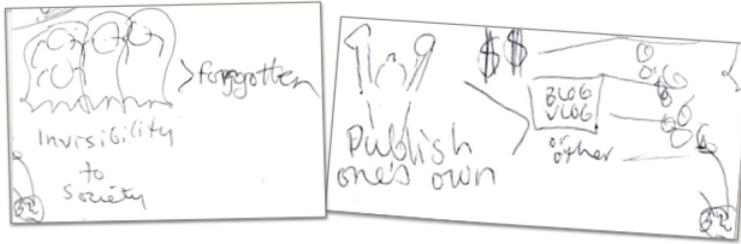


Figure 3. Publish one's own.

Image description: A collage of two-line drawings from *Crippling the Arts*. The first sketch pictures a group of ghost-like figures and features the words “forgotten” and “invisibility to society.” The second sketch pictures a person and the words “publish one’s own.” In the centre of the sketch there are two dollar sign symbols, a screen featuring the words “blog vlog,” and “or other.” On the right side of the sketch are several small circles grouped in vertical pattern.

In doing so, we need to take a lead in embracing, defining, and redefining our identity. One way I do this is by reclaiming labels that have been ascribed or imposed upon me. For example, while I strongly resist misrepresentative descriptions like “hearing impaired,” “handicapped,” or “disabled,” I also negotiate and re-negotiate these terms with society through writing, dancing, or simply through conversation. I am Deaf. Period. No socio-political correctness necessary.

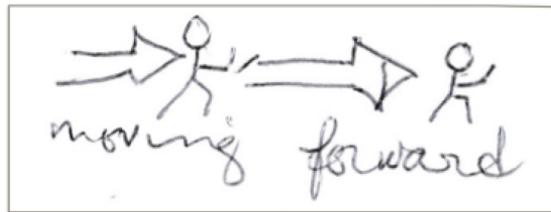


Figure 4. Moving forward.

Image description: A line drawing from *Crippling the Arts*. This sketch pictures an arrow pointing right towards a stick figure drawing of a person moving right towards another arrow pointing right towards another stick figure person moving right. Below the drawing, written in cursive, are the words “moving forward.”

We need to move forward by reflecting on social justice, our purpose and goals, on how we represent ourselves in society, especially in the arts. Making art is our right; it is inspirational and powerful. We crip normative notions of what it means to be human and what it means to be an artist. The world cannot leave us behind because we are the future.



Figure 5. Crip time.

Image description: A line drawing from *Crippling the Arts*. This sketch pictures an analog clock. The hour and minute hands point downward and reach beyond the clock face. Across the top of the clock are the words “crip time” in capital letters. Above the clock and moving upward across the page are waves and a series of figures growing bigger from seed to sprout to human figure to a person with an arm raised in the air. Under the person with their arm raised is the word “strong,” written in all caps.

Making a Change

Deaf, disabled, and mad artists are the future. We are not “problems.” *Crippling the Arts* reiterated to me that social change begins with us. We are working towards making crystal-clear our message of diversity, fairness, and inclusion in the arts. We collaborate and bring forward our definitions of and visions for a socially just world. We explore our individual and collective talents. Body movement and dance help me express to the world that being different is okay and honourable. Indeed, we can show the world our delicate beauty. As we evolve, we continue to change society by making the arts fully accessible. We crip the arts for the sake of social justice!

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the Bodies in Translation team and hosts of the *Crippling the Arts Symposium* for making this invaluable event happened. The experience I had in there still holds a piece in my mind and heart. I thank *Studies in Social Justice* for accepting and sharing my reflexive sketch work.