

OUT FROM UNDER: Disability, History and Things to Remember

Curators' Comment

In December of 2006, as faculty members in the School of Disability Studies at Ryerson University, we launched a seminar focusing on Canadian Disability History. Restless with conventional pedagogies of teaching by telling, we invited each participant to join us not with a head full of ideas but with an everyday object, an object that might be storied in some way, an object that carried portent, wonder or memory.

Our method was shaped by particular insights and curiosities: a desire to subvert received notions of history as a sequence of grand events, a thirst for discovery and astonishment, a commitment to open dialogic space, a predisposition toward taking objects seriously, a respect for the resilience – and the volatility – of disability movements, and above all, a determination to situate disabled actors and their allies as the protagonists of their own history.

In response to our invitation, a diverse collective of students and alumni, activists and scholars was formed, and an enterprise of creating disability history began *from the ground up*.

In the months that followed, our collaborators worked to make visible the hidden labours and meanings radiating out from each of thirteen objects. As we pursued the strands and couplings of a *social history* of disability in Canada, we rediscovered the interplay between “personal troubles”, public policy and social change. Struggles for social and political recognition, for survival and remembrance, for identity and pride, came to life in the narration of these diverse objects.

Through our assembly of this exhibition, the exhibitors and curators have a much-expanded sense of the struggles and alliances, the setbacks and steady progress of disabled people in Canada. Dislodging ourselves from dominant interpretive frames of medicine, technology and mean-spirited economics, we awakened to the resistance and activism embedded in disabled people's everyday lives.

There was – and is – much at stake in this enterprise. The claim to history is a declaration of self, place and solidarity at the same time as it is an articulation of new ground for debate. It is the brazen insurgency of outliers taking centre, refusing periphery. It is an announcement that we know, along with an affirmation that our knowledge matters. To make a claim of history is to count as author and social actor, to reach the tipping point from which entitlements to dignity, respect and the protection of human rights will be unstoppable.

To make a claim to histories, to their authorship and interpretation, is simultaneously to make a claim to futures.

Bringing disability history *out from under* is therefore a project of activist implication. It is our hope that the stories evoked by these thirteen objects will summon new inquiry and remembrance, and build new reciprocity upon contested ground. As we have in our engagements with each object, we hope that viewers will locate – and begin to reckon with – their own place in the living history of disability.

Out From Under: Disability, History and Things to Remember does not present an established canon of disability history. This exhibit makes no claim to be definitive or comprehensive. Our intent as curators and exhibitors is to unfold particular histories not as a recitation, but as an invitation. We hope that this invitation will mobilize new waves of activist claim-making, and that our nation's culture will be infused with the passions of a fierce and gentle history.

Out From Under: Disability, History and Things to Remember Curatorial Team:

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The logo for Ryerson University, featuring the text "RYERSON UNIVERSITY" in white, uppercase letters on a dark blue rectangular background. A yellow vertical bar is positioned to the right of the blue rectangle.

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