

The power of representation is undeniable. To be seen and heard is palpable, and yet for many of us, it is elusive. Those at the center have rarely ceded power to those of us at the margins telling our own stories, and those stories rarely achieve visibility outside of our immediate communities. We have seen a blossoming of directors, writers, and actors earning critical success in the “mainstream” film media in recent years, but the question of the mutuality of recognition remains.

Curation, much like film, is an opportunity to tell a story. Like film, it is an opportunity for artists and curators to engage viewers with new ideas and experiences. This year’s recipient of the Visual and Critical Studies Alumni Award, Amanda Cachia (MA 2012), interrogates curatorial approaches and practices to bring new methods that expand our understanding of disability. In her article “‘Disabling’ the Museum: Curator as Infrastructural Activist,” Cachia outlines her curatorial goal to “‘disable’ the limiting and pejorative practices of the art museum...by offering exhibitions with non-reductive disability-related content...” and challenging museums “to think about how access can move beyond a mere practical conundrum.” She has grounded her work in a specific project to rethink how we engage with objects, creating multisensory experiences that decenter the able-bodied experience at the museum.

Cachia’s exhibition *The Flesh of the World*, held in three separate galleries at the University of Toronto in 2015, complicated how we “see” disability, using art as a way to challenge the notion that disability should be overcome. Cachia challenged conventional curatorial approaches to exhibition production to create experiences in which the audience had to make physical adaptations to “move” through the exhibition. The artwork employed critical interventions in movement and experimentation, allowing the viewer to interact with objects in new ways and shifting preconceived attitudes of what disability means. Cachia’s work increases the visibility of otherwise marginalized communities by centering their experiences, **not** by putting them on display.

This is where diversity at the institutional level has fallen short. True diversity cannot happen within any institution without a substantive redistribution of power. Who gets to tell the stories, and who gets to be the protagonist, the assumed norm? To move beyond notional support of diversity, we need moments where those in positions of privilege—whether white, able bodied, male, cisgender, heterosexual—are decentered and forced to see themselves from the margins. As Cachia stretches the boundaries of the American imaginary, uncomfortable reactions may arise, but this makes room for new, and newly shared, self-representations of complexity and integrity.

This work can only be achieved when done equitably, when people have the agency to tell their own stories and the authority to make critical decisions on how they are told. And Amanda Cachia’s scholarship—synthesizing modern and contemporary art, curatorial

approaches, disability studies, performance, choreography and politics, activist art and museum access, and phenomenology—uniquely positions her to promote marginalized voices and model holistically integrated experiences. Cachia will continue her work as curator of the fall 2019 exhibition *Automatisme Ambulatoire: Hysteria, Imitation, Performance*, for Owens Art Gallery at Mount Allison University in New Brunswick, in which six international artists have been invited to consider how “hysterical” gestures can work to subvert, undo, transform, and reimagine the body and language.

In her book *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating*, Maura Reilly defines a curatorial activist as someone who focuses their curatorial efforts on visual culture “in, of, and from the margin” in an effort to destabilize the canon and challenge the center. She argues that curators must be held accountable not only to be more inclusive in their exhibition and collecting practices, but in how they approach curating artwork outside the realm of their lived experiences. Curators must follow due diligence by seeking information and testimony to address gaps in their knowledge. This assertion puts the onus on the curator to identify those gaps and incorporate new ways of working with marginalized communities in their practices.

But we also need to have difficult discussions around agency and the lack of diversity in curatorial departments at museums. Cachia identifies as “disabled, according to the social model of disability,” which I believe contributes greatly to her ability to curate with such poignancy and complexity. She is at a critical advantage for identifying the ways in which museums fail these communities. Cachia’s work helps us rethink how we, as curators, do what we do, and from which perspectives. Her work is particularly timely as we rethink practices so that we might address marginalization within our institutions without being reductive and tokenizing to those communities.

María Esther Fernández (VCS MA 2018) is Chief Curator at the Triton Museum of Art in Santa Clara, California.

### **Amanda Cachia Bio**

Amanda Cachia is an independent curator and critic from Sydney, Australia, and received her PhD in Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the University of California, San Diego, in spring 2017. She is Assistant Professor of Art History at Moreno Valley College in the Riverside Community College District in Southern California and the Director of Moreno Valley College Art Gallery, scheduled to open in spring 2019. Previously the Director/Curator of Dunlop Art Gallery in Saskatchewan, Canada, Cachia has curated approximately 40 exhibitions, many of which contain social justice themes and content. Her critical writing has been published in the Routledge anthologies *Disability and Art History*

and *Disability, Space, Architecture: A Reader*, numerous exhibition catalogs and art journals including *Artforum*, *CAA Reviews*, *Canadian Art*, *Art Monthly Australia*, and *On Curating*, and peer-reviewed academic journals such as *Art Journal*, *Design and Culture*, *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, *Museums and Social Issues*, and *The Senses and Society*. Forthcoming publications include chapters in several interdisciplinary anthologies. She has participated in numerous international and national conferences and related events within the USA, Canada, Australia, Europe, and the Middle East. Cachia has served as a Visiting Critic for the International Studio and Curatorial Program (ISCP) in NYC, and as a panelist for the Rubin Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Art Works grant, and the Canada Council for the Arts. She is a dwarf activist and serves on the College Art Association's (CAA) Committee on Women in the Arts (2017–2020).