

De-colonizing Disability Theory I – Crippling Development
September 19-21, 2013
Prague

Susan Schweik

Decolonizing Exposure: On the Case of Agent Orange

In July of 2011, I joined a group of Yelling Clinic artists to participate in the Global Public Health Institute's web forum, "Agent Orange in Vietnam: A Humanitarian Issue We Can Do Something About." I was preparing to go as a fellow traveler with the U.S.-based Yelling Clinic to connect with disabled artists and activists in Vietnam. In the background of one webcast talk, a series of images, presented without comment, caught our collective attention: radiant paintings of disabled people, of everyday disability life, in Vietnam, perhaps by a disabled artist—who was it? The speaker didn't know. We didn't know how to find out. But we were suddenly on fire. For us, Americans with roots in U.S. disability arts culture, the paintings hinted of a project like U.S. artist Riva Lehrer's "Circle Stories," portraits charting, in Lehrer's words, "the existence of a community of disabled innovators who provide support and context for the work of redefinition of disability in the 21st century." When the Yelling Clinic located and met with the artist, these paintings became not documentary evidence of the ravages of dioxin but rather a vibrant part of a creative circle, taking related—but also critically different—shape in Vietnam. In images, disabled Vietnamese people are so often turned before the viewer in silence, pure emblems of ecocide. We started with this understanding: A person is not a public history exhibit. Agent Orange in Vietnam: what *else* might "we" do about it, and who is we? I will focus on "coping with exposure" to Agent Orange, in 3 senses: the phrase speaks to the issues of people exposed to harm from dioxin; and to the ways in which the same people are represented—exposed—to the public eye; and also to the ways in which, through representations, we all are exposed to—told the story of, and laid bare by—Agent Orange. How do we all cope with our exposures to Agent Orange? This talk will present some of the generative, complex artistic results as those questions were explored in cross-cultural, cross-disability dialogues by Vietnamese disabled artists with the Yelling Clinic collective.