

2021

Bodies and Expressions: Exploring the Aesthetics of Disability Performance Art

Jaya Sarkar
jaya1sarkar@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/tete_a_tete



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Dance Commons](#), [Disability Studies Commons](#), [Modern Languages Commons](#), [Other Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#), and the [Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sarkar, Jaya (2021) "Bodies and Expressions: Exploring the Aesthetics of Disability Performance Art," *Tête-à-Tête*: Vol. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/tete_a_tete/vol1/iss1/6

Bodies and Expressions: Exploring the Aesthetics of Disability Performance Art

by Jaya Sarkar

This paper examines how the bodies of disabled performance artists challenge the system from the stage by pushing back against the barriers of normativity. Disabled performance artists call out cultural expectations and objectification, which troubles issues of ableism. Drawing on Jasbir Puar's theory of assemblage, which deindividualizes agency, this essay interrogates how the aesthetics of disability performances invite the audiences to accept rather than reject unfamiliar physical forms. Using Tobin Siebers and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's concept of disability aesthetics, the paper challenges the particular inclination to equate normalcy with beauty. Drawing examples from disability performance art, the paper examines the representation of freakishness and its exhibition in Western societies, demonstrating how public displays of extraordinary bodies facilitated the definition of cultural distinctions as natural. Disability performances recreate the scenes of disability in such a way that the normative viewer requires a sort of justification after encountering a disabled body. This brings to the forefront the existence of social hierarchies and power relationships. The presence of the performance artist on the stage questions the dynamic relationship between the performer and the audience and results in the act of staring. The disabled body summons the stare, and the stare mandates the story. The essay focuses on how the disabled body, which had been isolated and confined in institutions for long, is emerging out of the boundaries of academic study and into the streets, stages, and daily lives of the nondisabled.

The bodies of disabled performance artists threaten the fantasies of nondisabled and generates a “normative anxiety” when it is represented as aesthetically beautiful. Tobin Siebers in his book *Disability Aesthetics* (2010) tries to correct the fact that most non-disabled people have a difficult time believing the fact that disabled artists could only make significant contributions to art, either as symbols of aesthetic beauty or by making art themselves. Siebers say that modern art constantly evolves a powerful connection to disability with its techniques and by the embrace of bodies. He argues against “a nonmaterialist aesthetics that devalues the role of the body and limits the definition of art” (17). The bodies are not only represented through art, but they are also part of the representation process. Siebers predicts that the emergence of disability aesthetics might establish disability as “a critical framework that questions the presuppositions underlying definitions of aesthetic production and appreciation” (Ware 197). In *Disability Aesthetics*, Tobin Siebers has advanced the arguments of Snyder and Mitchell that modern art has increasingly questioned the art object’s relation to perfection to the point where “disability, disease, and injury have become the figures by which aesthetic beauty as such is now recognized” (Siebers 85). Art works created and performed by artists with disabilities is often a site of knowledge for both the artists and the audience. This site is an intersection of identity, ideology, language, politics, social oppression, and the body. Disability arts expose and exploit various ways to claim disability identity for the artists. Snyder and Mitchell notes:

For disabled artists, the socially aberrant body is forced to engage in an exchange. First, the disabled body offers itself for consumption by audiences often alienated from their own bodies. And then the artist turns that spectacle into a re-articulation of disability as a source of insight and power. Such artworks aim towards claiming disability as embodied and complex difference which should be celebrated.

Once disabled performance artists appear on the stage, their bodies become texts for the audience to study and interpret. However, the artists focus on transforming that spectacle into a sight of power. They use their bodies to claim their disabilities so that the audience could celebrate it.

In “Crips Strike Back: The Rise of Disability Studies”, Lennard Davis talks about the supposed normality which all bodies must adhere to. He argues that the shift from the rule of the normates, to that of the body as changeable, imperfect and untidy is necessary. Both the virtual and real public performance spaces, provides the artists with disabilities, multiple ways to experiment with the symbolism of aesthetic production. In the context of McRuer’s “Crip Theory”, Davidson shows how disabled figures are often used to reinforce the normative expectations about how a body should appear and function. By challenging such expectations, the defamiliarization of the body takes place, and through this Davidson links “the radical politics of ‘crip theory’ with the aesthetics and hermeneutics of Russian formalism” (Gaedtke 166). Petra Kuppers, a disability culture activist, a community artist, and a Professor of English, describes herself as an “on-off wheelchair and crutch user”, has produced a body of work which includes both Siebers’s disability aesthetics and Snyder and Mitchell’s cultural characterization of disability in 21st century art. Her performance work figures individuals with physical, psychiatric, and intellectual disabilities to represent restriction and “contained spaces”-imposed physically or socially. With her performance work, Kuppers transform the private experience of disability into public- “not as an exposé but to stake a claim for the ‘commonality’ of experience that might otherwise remain unvoiced” (Ware 199).

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s *Freakery* examines the representation of freakishness and its exhibition in Western societies, further demonstrating how public displays of extraordinary bodies facilitated the definition of cultural distinctions as natural, thereby bringing to the forefront “a variety of social hierarchies and inequitable power relationships”.

Disability performance according to Thomson “reenacts the primal scene of disability in which the normative viewer encounters the disabled body and demands an explanation” (Thomson 334). Garland- Thomson argues: “In the social context of an ablist society, the disabled body summons the stare, and the stare mandates the story” (335). The freakish body functions as a kind of “egalitarian shrine” to threaten democratic ideas of freedom and independence. The beauty of the disabled artworks also invites the viewers to accept rather than reject unfamiliar physical forms, and to broaden their understanding of human beings and their behaviour. Siebers urges the disability community to imprint disabled bodies and minds on the public landscape, and to come up with new modes of beauty that attacks the traditional aesthetic and political standards of uniformity, balance, hygiene, and integrity.

The disability performance artists like Mary Duffy, Carrie Sandhal and Petra Kupperts challenges this particular inclination to equate normality with beauty in Western aesthetics. They engage their bodies through their works to call out the cultural expectations and objectifications. Through their performances, they give rise to intersectional sites of critical intervention, witness, and interrogation by placing their own bodies in the very spaces that serve as sources of their objectification. This represents a reconsideration of the discourse of disability in art and “emphasizes the critical role of art in troubling the social and political issue of ableism.” (Eisenhauer 10). They represent an appropriation of a sideshow method with the intention of transforming the objectifying stares of the viewers into the moments of their own personal agency through the performative act of ‘staring back’. The figure of Venus de Milo is an important example to which the disability theorists keep coming back. The aesthetic quality of the art work is there primarily because of the absence of both of the arms, Siebers believes. In René Magritte’s version of the Venus, the splashed blood-red pigment on the arm-stumps represent a recent amputation. Mary Duffy, a performance artist, without arms, identify herself with Venus de Milo. She questions the traditional Western construction of beauty through the

articulation of disability aesthetics. Mary Duffy's performance as the living Venus de Milo encompasses the two modes of looking: staring at the freakish body, and also gazing at the art of the beautiful female body. The audience who stares at her notices a deviation from the normate, but couldn't help their rapt gaze and the intrusive stare. Duffy however, stares back insisting upon her self-definition. This unsettles the traditional assumptions about femininity, disability, and the aesthetics of the body. This induced a sort of shock value in the audience by attacking the imaginary used to determine how the body norms should be.

Art could be traumatic if it reminds a spectator of his/her any personal event- it does not have to be a death or an injury of a loved one, but because the art means much more than it should. Trauma art is at once "impersonal and painful". It could be interpreted as aesthetic but in unexpected ways. The violence is no longer contained in an aesthetic frame. Even in otherwise aesthetic objects, one could find representations of violence and trauma. Susan Sontag defends "watching suffering at a distance" and argues it is extremely important to involve thinking along with the act of watching. With the examples of war photographs, Sontag claims that no person should be unaware of the suffering and pain caused to others. She believes that photographs have power to anesthetize its viewers, a way of response to art that does not involve any intellectual interpretation. With photographs, the understanding of pain and even trauma becomes meaningful. Individuals can tune out images of the same horror and trauma day by day, only when the photographs represent people and places detached from the lived experience of the viewer. Photographs of pain and horror are often viewed in an unflinching manner, because we "feel safe in our distance" (Parsons 294). The video footages of a traumatic event like that of the 9/11 attack, or the very recent video of an Indian migrant child trying to wake his dead mother, are played in loops throughout the day in several news channels. This self-conscious repetition of a traumatic event later occurs in our actions, dreams and conversations, in order to "integrate the trauma into a psychic structure" (Anden-Papadopoulos

89). Most of the times, the news channels work on an obsessive fixation of repeating the traumatic images without integrating them into an interpretative framework. This results in a wider cultural shock. This kind of traumatic realism lets the real ‘shine through’ the representative screen. To fully examine the political and psychological impact of such representations, a visual culture approach is necessary to consider their aesthetic qualities. This sort of exposure of the “distant suffering of others” not only serve to raise public consciousness but also help them to bear witness and promote a collective healing.

Gaelynn Lea, a musician and a disability rights activist hails from Duluth, Minnesota. She has brittle bone disease because of which her body is small, and therefore, to be able to play the violin, she has to bow it like a cello. She uses a loop pedal to multiply her instrumental melodies, creating a rich textural fabric that undulates beneath her ethereal mezzo-soprano. In an NPR interview, Gaelynn speaks about the relationship between her disability and her music. Her submission video begins with herself out of the frame, a conscious artistic choice, as Gaelynn explains: “I didn’t necessarily want my disability to be the very first impression people had. It’s not because I’m ashamed of it in any way, but I really wanted my music to be judged.” She has appeared in several major festivals and has captivated audiences around the world with her unique mix of haunting original songs and traditional fiddle tunes. She uses her music as a platform to advocate for disabled people and to promote positive social change. In her essay “Just Looking and Staring Back: Challenging Ableism Through Disability Performance Art”, Jennifer Eisenhauer talks about the inclusion of the disabled people doing art and how it places an emphasis upon the representation of difference through admiration and appreciation in which the disabled artists are admired only because of their ability to create work similar to other non-disabled artists. She emphasizes:

It’s what makes a disability artist different from an artist with a disability. We don’t see our disabilities as obstacles that we have to overcome before we try to make our way

in the non-disabled cultural world. Our politics teach us that we are oppressed, not inferior. (Sutherland 182)

Gaelynn Lea's performances focus on her musical talent, rather than on her disability. The appreciation and admiration which she receives are because of her ability to create original songs and fiddle tunes.

The discourses of queer theory, films, globalization, and contemporary literature represent the aesthetics and politics of disability and how they are transformed and developed in disability art. The new forms of art represent body as a primary aesthetic symbol. In *Disability Aesthetics*, Siebers cites examples from works of Andy Warhol, Chris Burden and other artists to explain this shift in art with the objective of invoking "powerful emotional responses to the corporeality of aesthetic objects" (Siebers 134). "Forget what you know about disability": this is the motto from Viktoria Modesta's video song *Prototype*. The song focuses on what the future prototype of a human should be: part human, part technology. The song combines natural and artificial instead of juxtaposing them on top of the other, and through the song, Modesta brings to attention a new body image for women with disabilities and new adaptation patterns for people with disabilities. The Latvian artist, Modesta, is 'armed' with one of her prostheses, a spike leg, and hence, becomes both an incarnation of monstrous femininity and a pop-cultural cyborg overcoming biological deficiencies. Modesta uses her body as the artistic subject, creating new design dimensions geared towards innovative ways of social engagement through sensation, emotion and healing. She challenges people's perceptions of limiting disabilities and the impact of this on their social status by redesigning possibilities for the body. As an amputee, she has been able to turn her bodily constraint on its head. Along with a new prosthetic leg, she also uses an accelerometer which allows her to interact both spatially and sonically with an ensemble of musicians playing MONAD Studio's 3D-printed musical instruments. Modesta changes emancipatory disability narration from

clichéd Helen Keller stories and moves it closer to cyberpunk by exploring issues of avant-garde, and combining technology with art. Additionally, it focuses on the notion of reclaiming one's body, taking control of it. Modesta highlights the significance of reflecting one's personality through an altered body image; this is precisely what gained media attention and opened numerous avenues for her. As Anna Moore wrote in an article in *The Times*, "She's stunning— with her rolled hair and doll face, she looks like Bettie Page landed in *Blade Runner*— but the biggest buzz is reserved for her legs." Apart from Brass leg, stereo leg, light leg, spike leg, crystal leg; these are a few examples of Modesta's alternative limbs functioning as both fashion items and art projects, modifying her into a "bionic pop artist."

The song *Prototype* is Modesta's most popular art work. The song was produced as a part of the "Born Risky" campaign launched by Channel 4, which is mainly focused on issues of diversity, discovering alternative voices and introducing creative phenomenon. The song opens with an aural image: a pointed heel of a shoe strikes sharply as it comes down onto a glass surface. The camera moves up to focus on Modesta's spike leg. The abstract quality of this scene introduces a new nameless experience. The next image of the song presents Modesta as a queen sitting on a high throne, and surrounded by three men in hooded clothes, performing an amputation surgery on Modesta's leg. The song concentrates on a cult in some historically undefined police state— where Modesta inspires a rebellion. Her prosthesis wields superpower, but its connotations with new identity and individuality are more important, encouraging people to stand up for themselves. Modesta challenges the notions of what a body is capable of, and the spectators are affected every time they view her performances. Bill Hughes talks about Bruno Latour's suggestion that:

We should think about bodies, not as things or reified objects, but as process, in terms of 'what a body can do', its reactions, impacts, capacities and practices, and, most fundamentally, how it affects and is affected. (Hughes 69)

Hughes believes that the discrimination against disabled people is born out of fear, pity and disgust of the non-disabled and is also a result of negative social representations. When a disabled body is represented as aesthetically beautiful and powerful, it creates an existential insecurity for the non-disabled which results in the rise of a feeling of anguish. Modesta does the same with her work, and by showing her disability as a weapon, she wields power over the normative audience.

Margrit Shildrick argues that for the able-bodied individuals, the cultural imaginary is full of “fantasies of an invulnerable body.” These disabled bodies threaten this imagination and generates a “normative anxiety”, which is impossible to get rid of. The capacity of the disabled body to disturb the cultural expectations is universal. It disturbs the comfortable settlements of civility, narrow ableist notions about proper behaviour and bodily norms. This sort of visual culture not only serve to raise public consciousness but also help them to bear witness and promote a collective healing. Shildrick rejects any differences between the disabled and the non-disabled body. She argues that the body is produced by meaning and interpretation and can be therefore represented in culture. Bill Hughes in “Disability and the Body” draws conclusion from this and states that: since the non-disabled body does not exist, so does impairment- it is only a cultural representation that “has become located in a negative language of defect and deficit.” The non-impaired body treats the impaired bodies as exclusive, restricted, discriminatory and oppressive. While watching performances by disabled artists the audience are forced to think about the represented experiences of disability, and to confront their own beliefs of ableist norms and expectations through the act of staring. Disability performance art helps achieve this connection between the physical and the cognitive, and to further add layers to the material and immaterial forces affecting disability representations. This also helps in linking the aesthetics to the material experience of disability. To situate

disability representation at the seam of biology/impairment and aesthetics/culture, newer work on disability representations in visual media studies should be considered more carefully.

Works Cited

- Anden-Papadopoulus, Kari. "The trauma of representation: Visual culture, photojournalism and the September 11 terrorist attack." *Nordicom Review*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2003, pp. 89-104.
- Church, David. "Fantastic Films, Fantastic Bodies: Speculations on the Fantastic and Disability Representation." *Off Screen*, 2006.
- Davidson, Michael. *Concerto for the left hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body*. University of Michigan Press, 2008.
- Davis, Lennard J. "Crips strike back: The rise of disability studies." *American Literary History*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1999, pp. 500-512.
- Eisenhauer, Jennifer. "Just Looking and Staring Back: Challenging Ableism through Disability Performance Art." *Studies in Art Education*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2007, pp. 7-22. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25475851
- Fraser, Benjamin. *Cognitive Disability Aesthetics*. University of Toronto Press, 2018.
- Gaedtke, Andrew. "The Politics and Aesthetics of Disability: A Review of Michael Davidson's Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2009, pp.164-170.
- Hughes, Bill. "Disability and the Body." *Disabling Barriers—Enabling environments*, vol. 2, 2004, pp. 43-68.

- Hughes, Bill. "Invalidating Emotions in the Non-disabled Imaginary: Fear, pity and disgust." *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*. Routledge, 2012. pp. 67-78.
- Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. "Disability takes on the arts [DVD]." Available from Brace Yourselves Productions, 2004.
- Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the dependencies of Discourse*. University of Michigan Press, 2014.
- Parsons, Sarah. "Sontag's Lament: Emotion, Ethics, and Photography." *Photography and Culture*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2009, pp. 289-302.
- Quayson, Ato. *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the crisis of representation*. Columbia University Press, 2007.
- Shildrick, Margrit. "The disabled body, genealogy and undecidability." *Cultural studies*, vol. 19, no. 6, 2005, pp. 755-770.
- Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Theory*. University of Michigan Press, 2008.
- . *Disability Aesthetics*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010.
- Sutherland, Allan. "Disability arts, Disability politics." *Framed: Interrogating disability in the media*, 1997, pp. 182-183.
- Thomson, Rosemarie Garland. *Freakery: Cultural spectacles of the extraordinary body*. New York University Press, 1996.
- Thomson, Rosemarie Garland. "Staring Back: Self-Representations of Disabled Performance Artists." *American Quarterly*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2000, pp. 334-338.
- Ware, Linda. "When Art Informs: Inviting Ways to See the Unexpected." *Learning Disability Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2011, pp. 194-202.

