

ABLEISM KITSCH: THE AESTHETICS OF DISABILITY-RELATED ETHICS

HABILITÉS KITSCH

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Abstract

This paper discusses the socio-political and ethical meanings of the various relationships between disablement, ableism, and ethics as they are generated through aesthetics, and does so by critiquing Tobin Siebers's article "Disability Aesthetics" (2006). Siebers claims that disability has a tacit and valuable presence in western art. Disability is esteemed when represented in art, yet devalued in normative social relations. The author thus critiques disability aesthetics by investigating the beautiful, the sublime, "madness", "mental impairment", ableism, kitsch, and cultural appropriation. From this the author argues that disability aesthetics is a spectacularized, once removed, *representational* deviance from the humdrum normalization of western culture, providing contact with the intense, unusual, and shocking. By providing the gestures of transformation within the safety net of image, art is a virtual escape from the hyper-real predictability of hegemony; it is a secure place to experience, respond, flirt, and abandon difference in the vortex of representation.

Keywords: disability, art, sublime, kitsch, ableism, normalcy, cultural, appropriation

Résumé

Cet article fait la critique du texte "Disability Aesthetics" (2006) de Tobin Siebers. Ce dernier prétend que l'art occidental a laissé une place implicite, mais somme toute significative au handicap. Au moyen d'un examen des raisons pour lesquelles le handicap est valorisé lorsqu'il est représenté sous une forme artistique, mais dévalorisé à l'intérieur des normes et des relations sociales, j'explorerai l'idée d'une esthétique du handicap en analysant les concepts suivants : le beau, le sublime, la "folie", la "maladie mentale", l'handicapisme¹, le kitsch et l'appropriation culturelle. Cette réflexion m'apportera ensuite à traiter de l'esthétique du handicap comme *représentation* spectaculaire et déviante face au processus inhérent de trivialisatation présent dans la culture occidentale, ouvrant par le fait même au contact avec l'étrange, l'extrême et le scandaleux. En présentant l'importance de la distanciation du sujet devant l'image dans la métamorphose du sens du handicap, l'art se manifeste désormais en tant que lieu d'évasion virtuelle de la prévisibilité de l'hyperréalité hégémonique. En effet, il devient un lieu sûr permettant d'expérimenter, de réagir, de flirter et de se départir du concept de différence dans le vortex de la représentation.

Mots-clés: handicap, art, sublime, kitsch, normalité, appropriation culturelle

¹ Il s'agit d'une forme de discrimination liée au fait de présenter des incapacités.

Introduction

How can we return to the world of real things with knowledge about it gained from our experience with the artworld? (Feagin, 1999, p. 216)

Examining systems of aesthetics is crucial to critiquing and re-evaluating modes of oppression and power. In the captivating and provocative article, “Disability Aesthetics”, Tobin Siebers (2006) argues that disability is “integral to aesthetic conceptions of the beautiful”, and that the “influence of disability in art has grown, not dwindled, over the course of time” (p. 67). Expanding upon Siebers’s claim that representations of disability inform and constitute “the beautiful” in art, this paper is concerned with exploring why there is such a disparity between what constitutes the beautiful in North American cultural discourses of art, versus how beauty is defined, regulated, and distinguished in real-life social relations. How is it that representations of disability are valuable when represented in art, yet devalued in real life North American society? Also, what are the ethical significations of the absence of acknowledging how disability informs and contributes to cultural constructions of art?

First, I critique Siebers’s concept of disability aesthetics by locating the importance of transformation in conceptions of the beautiful in art and its complicated embodiedness in relation to disability. In this section, I examine how the symbols of the sublime are articulated through “madness”, that is, how notions of the artist as endowed with “a fine madness” reinforces art as a discourse of the sublime while paradoxically disembodimenting

representations of disability² as it is pictured. Following this, I claim that oppression and hegemony are aesthetically informed, and I demonstrate how the discursive signatures that mark normalcy operate through a particular kitsch aesthetic. Normalcy as kitsch locates certain experiences of stigma as embedded in the disabled subject's distance from certain kitschy ideals. Lastly, I argue that disability aesthetics does not signify a desire to experiment with human form; rather, disability aesthetics is a sublime misidentification, appropriation, and removal of disability from any acknowledgment of the real. Disability aesthetics is not a sign of respect for certain bodies, but is instead symptomatic of art as a discourse of gawking, voyeurism, escapism, and distance that seizes—and then abandons—its disabled “Other”.

When I use “kitsch”, I employ Hal Foster's (2005) notion of kitsch as a glistening, decontextualized optimism, a replication of a certain image of sensationalized subjectivity that uniforms The Self into an object constructed to be cohesive and synchronized with the prerogatives of the nation. Kitsch is spectacular strategic ideology implemented in times of national crisis to bolster and mass produce a maudlin evocation of “brotherhood of man” by conjuring and reproducing mythic ahistorical signs framed as symbols that work to initiate, demonstrate, and build a sense of unity/nationalism created for the very purpose of fighting the enemy Other. In the case of this paper, I argue that bodies are nationalized via

² I use the term “disability” as synonymous with “impairment” because both are value-laden terms. Unlike the claims of the social model that defines “disability” as the experience that occurs through environmental barriers that disable the impaired individual, and “impairment” as the value-neutral characteristic that belongs to an individual, I argue that it is impossible for “impairment” to ever be a value-neutral term because the word itself means deficit or mutilation. From where I am coming from, “disability” is a word for the oppressive and stigmatizing conditions those who are perceived as “impaired” experience, while “impairment” is a word that describes the ableist ideas of what is perceived as a deficit, and is summoned only in circumstances when essential (normative) abilities are missing in an individual

kitsch to create unity through iconographizing normality while framing disabled embodiments as the enemy Other or victim.

Disability Aesthetics: Is Art the Place Where Disability Goes to be Naturalized?

Siebers supplies a comprehensive list of examples of famous art sharing one commonality: each piece articulates embodiments that are marked in various ways as disabled. Not only does Siebers claim that “good art incorporates disability” (2006, p. 65), he also argues that a disabled sensibility is always present in identifications of the beautiful. He further asks why disability aesthetics “seem[s] more real” (2006, p. 64) than aesthetic representations that do not include disability. Siebers interprets the steady embeddedness of disability in aesthetic representations as connected to art’s captivation with the convulsive, disharmonious, strange, and exceptional body that is not in possession of perfect health.

Siebers explains the relevance and perceived value of modern vandalism of classical art works, for these pieces are renewed into forms that provide mimeses for a contemporary art world that is ever more engrossed with disability aesthetics. Moreover, Siebers contextualizes modern art and modern acts of art vandalism as a form of aesthetic experimentation that reflects a longing to experiment with human embodiment. Vandalized images of disability can be beheld “not as a symbol of human imperfection but as an experience of the corporeal variation found everywhere in modern life” (2006, p. 67).

If disability aesthetics is the hegemonic and prolific discourse of modern art, Siebers identifies art as the dynamic cultural site designated to discover and extend the continuum encompassed by human life. In other words, disability aesthetics is the

discourse that awards physical and mental differences as crucially valuable in and of themselves. Besides the problems with connecting disability to vandalism (the unvandalized work of art as the original template and the vandalized as the tampered, denaturalized model of humanity), we should ask whether it is possible for contemporary art to address corporeal variation when it is relatively unaware of its own disabled nucleus. The recognition that art is permeated, inspired, and engaged with representations of disability would hopefully espouse a corresponding revelation that disability is valuable and beautiful in its own right, and that humanity is a vast and divergent species. But does it? Is there any connection between disability aesthetics and the re-evaluation of disabled embodiments in real-life social relations?

Siebers discusses the work of Judith Scott, a fibre artist classified as having Down syndrome. Art theorist John MacGregor has raised concerns regarding the validity of Scott's work. According to Siebers, MacGregor questions whether "serious mental retardation" disqualifies the creation of true works of art, and whether "art in the fullest sense of the word" can transpire when "intellectual development is massively impaired from birth, and when normal intellectual and emotional maturation has failed to be attained" (2006, p. 71). Regardless of the possible answers, these questions elucidate the heavy contradiction between representation, imagination, and lived reality. Is art a site that prizes physical and mental differences when its producers are expected to possess normate³ intelligence?

³ Considered to be first coined by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "normate" is a term born out of a critique that denaturalizes the supposed realness of the idea of a norm. It centers an analysis on examining the ethical, political, and cultural significations and the discursive processes that inform and constitute normativity. As Garland-Thomson (2002) states, normate is: "the corporeal incarnation of culture's collective, unmarked, normative characteristics" (p.10).

In contrast with Scott's real-life disability, Siebers examines the work of Paul McCarthy, a performance artist who enacts mental and cognitive disability. According to Siebers, McCarthy's performances defy the canon of disinterestedness⁴ in the evaluation of aesthetic objects by exposing this mode of gazing as no more than a censorship of the realism of embodiment. As a method of cultural critique, McCarthy "asks to be seen as idiocy, as if one of the core values of intelligence and genius were being systematically removed from the aesthetic in preference to stupidity and cognitive disorder" (2006, p. 68). The result of McCarthy's performance art is that his audience often ends up perceiving him as cognitively and mentally disabled.

McCarthy's status as an artist is not threatened by his performance of "idiocy" because this personification is vital to his artistic intent, which is to deconstruct the ideological discontents of disinterestedness and prioritization of normative notions of intelligence. This he does as a person considered embodying normate intelligence. In this context, "idiocy" is a strategic artifice summoned by McCarthy because it has the representative powers to signify the undoing of cultural order. In other words, cognitive disability is evoked by McCarthy as a tactic of complete symbolic social defamiliarization. This places individuals actually considered to be cognitively disabled where? Scott's classification creates friction between her identity and that which is allowed passport into the capital "A" of aesthetic discourse. What are the socio-political and ethical significations

4

"Disinterestedness" is the name for a specific discourse within aesthetic theory. It is a canonical mode of judging works of art. It does not imply lack of interest, but requires an unimpassioned state of mind in order to "objectively" judge the value of an aesthetic object. It requires total engagement and captivation from a state of unemotionality. The discourse of disinterestedness is what Siebers directly refers to when he discusses McCarthy's work.

that create this situation in which “enacting idiocy” marries with art in the fullest sense of the word, while the presence of Down syndrome troubles the value of highly complex and arresting found-object fibre art?

Performing idiocy and living under the classification of idiocy are two very different things within the world of art. This division has had a long historical legacy. Ruth von Bernuth (2006) discusses Renaissance Europe’s conception of people with disabilities as a site of rarity, wonder, spectacle, artifact, and above all, entertainment in the form of comic relief. Bernuth cites the “Triumph of Maximilian I (1459–1519)” and his parade of “fools”. Maximilian partitioned his fools into two categories: natural and artificial. These fools were to entertain in two separate carts. In the second cart, the natural fools were identified as people born with various kinds of disabilities and were clad with natural inspired ornamentation, such as wood and twigs. The artificial fools were non-disabled subjects identified as “jesters”, whose purpose was to parody the natural fools in order to contribute to the collective imagination of folly present in medieval and Renaissance times. The jesters wore costumes that reflected popular conceptualizations of folly, such as a big ear of a donkey with a bell as a sign for laziness or stupidity, as well as outfits that represented the ape, to provide a symbol for unsteadiness.

By mimicking disablement through hyperbole and obscenity, the fool bolstered the stigma and outsider status of real disabled people by instigating an inherently disrespectful and hostile depiction of disabled people as the sum total of ridicule and spectacle. Therefore, parodying disablement, “enacting idiocy”, in the form of public performance, is

nothing new. The dissimilarity regarding the legitimacy of Scott versus McCarthy in the art world demonstrates the still-alive partitioning of the natural and artificial “fool”.

One other way of critiquing McCarthy’s artistic enterprise is by examining the distinction between mental disability and mental illness as it relates to the artistic identity. While the value of the artist and her artistic production can be jeopardized with the label of intellectual impairment (as demonstrated with Scott), the value of the artist who exhibits behaviour aligned with “mental illness” is often not endangered, and may be heightened. In “Touched with Fire: Manic Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament”, Kay Redfield Jameson (1993) examines the common link between artists and manic-depressive illness, focusing on the sociological significations of “a fine madness”. Jameson queries: “Is there something about prolonged periods of melancholia—broken at times by episodes of manic intensity and expansiveness—that leads to a different kind of insight, compassion, and expression of the human condition?” (p. 102). The answer for Jameson is clearly “yes” as throughout “Touched with Fire”, she recapitulates the sentiment that the creative acumen required to cultivate artistic genius is spawned through erratic and inconsistent moods.

In Jameson’s paradigm, the “mad” artist is both plagued and gifted with wild, uncontrollable, emotive responses, and is therefore most sensitive to the outer limits of the human condition. Privy to the full palate of phenomenological “beingness”, the mad artist is in the position to sculpt, paint, weave, splatter, sing, press, write, picture, prose, dance, act, and carve, all in order to represent the longing to understand what it means to be human. Artwork’s success relies on its ability to connect with viewers in ways that resonates and intensely envelops.

Using cognitive disability as a mode of aesthetic radicalism bolstered McCarthy's identity as an artist endowed with a fine madness. As such, McCarthy's enactment of "idiocy" was metaphorized and consumed as a representation of his madness, and indicated no more than his acumen as an erratic avant-garde cultural critic. If the artistic identity is defined by a fine madness, McCarthy's disability aesthetic is normative in that it conforms to the dominant notion of the artistic temperament as the key to unleashing prolific aesthetic power. If nothing else, McCarthy's enterprise reveals how the representational vernacular of a fine madness in art objects is likely to be disability.

A Fine Madness, Disability Aesthetics, and Sublime Transformation

As Jameson articulates, artistic creations are positioned as the mediator that simulates and witnesses the versatile expressions of extraordinary aspects of existence. Art is a virtual portal that dramatizes and encapsulates the disparity between "normal" life and grandiosity, while also acting as proof of the ambivalence, the often tacit presence of pain inherent in the possibilities of transformation. The intensity of the artistic temperament is supposed to possess and linger within the frame of the art product, and the response to artwork is supposed to mirror the intensity of the artist's temperament.

Crip poet Jim Ferris (2008) promotes Emily Dickenson's definition of poetry as born through an experiential understanding that happens when she is reading a book that makes her entire body feel "so cold no fire could ever warm me", and "physically as if the top of my head were taken off" (p. 1). To Dickenson, these visceral experiences are the

singular way to know what poetry is. This sentiment elucidates the expectation that art is constituted through an excruciatingly affective experience.

Jameson, Ferris, and Dickenson all identify artistry as spawned from a certain branch of pain. As Friedrich Nietzsche proclaims, “How much did this people have to suffer to be able to become so beautiful!” (cited in Korsmeyer, 1999, p. 242). Nietzsche goes on to define art as tied to continual strife with only infrequent moments of resolution. In this painful paradigm, suffering evokes joy, and elation generates agony. At the culmination of pleasure there exists the terror of an erudite requiem dedicated to an irrevocable loss. Aesthetic beauty is born from experiences of powerful reconfiguration linked to suffering.

Not only is art continually defined in terms of affectivity, art is also the conviction that there is a value specific to suffering that enables transformation. There are important questions to ask. What are the ethical significations contained within art and its high threshold for pain? How is tumultuous intensity embodied? How is affectivity pictured?

Davide Panagia (2003) states, “an aesthetic object is valuable despite our liking it” (p. 73). How is value formulated when judging an aesthetic object if not through liking it? If aesthetic appreciation includes dislike, perhaps this is because a prime expectation of an aesthetic object is its capacity, not to please us in the traditional sense of enjoyment, but to shake, stun, and astound us out of normal ways of doing and feeling. “The beautiful” may be constituted through the experience of implosion, through transgression of the scope that divides delight and revulsion for the rawness of haptic viscera. If this is so, does good

art incorporate disability because it is constituted through ruptures that engulf normative modes of perception?

Immanuel Kant defines the sublime as unbounded: it is that which has no relative magnitude; it is mathematically incomparable. The sublime is “Absolutely Great” (Kant, 1951, p. 82), comprehensively overwhelming, total transformation, and complete defamiliarization. Busting the scale that charts the spectrum of human experience, the sublime overpowers and trivializes everything that is not “It”. The sublime is the name for the thing that exists through the experience of pure exceptionality that situates every other life experience as comparatively miniscule and inconsequential. It is a tornado that sweeps everything we have known and felt and perceived into dust—not forever, but for an incalculable instance.

Kant explains the sublime as containing “not so much a positive pleasure as rather admiration and respect, and so should be called a negative pleasure” (cited in Korsmeyer, 1999, p. 265). The inclusion and partitioning of negative and positive as embedded within the category of “pleasure” complicates the association of pleasure with pure delight, and makes room for a philosophical deliberation that considers torment and repulsion as equally at home with the concept of pleasure. Negative pleasure is an epistemological expansion that recognizes the complexities, ambivalences, and heavy convolution implicit in pleasing experiences, and accordingly, in formulations of the beautiful. Critiquing the leitmotifs of disability aesthetics in art requires an examination of the artistic relevance of negative pleasure.

Karlheinz Stockhausen, an electronic musician, was publicly condemned after claiming that the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre was “the greatest work of art that is possible in the whole cosmos”, because art, “should transform us out of life itself... otherwise it’s nothing” (Letricchia & McAuliffe, 2002, p. 351). Though Stockhausen’s stance concerning the World Trade Centre attack is ethically callous because it does not acknowledge the tragedy of death on a massive scale, his notion is that good art involves a jut into the extraordinary, a thrust into the sublime. In the article, “Groundzeroland”, Frank Letricchia and Jody McAuliffe discuss the terrorist attack as symbolic of the close alignment between art, terror, and complete transformation of consciousness. Letricchia and McAuliffe contextualize the attack as a sublime act that stripped “the film of familiarity” through “a theatre of lessons, visually encoded”, otherwise known as contemporary performance art (2002, pp. 350–356).

Though Stockhausen’s stance seems uniquely morally atrocious, he is no different than your run-of-the-mill artist or art critic in the sense that he believes the key purpose of art is to transform one’s life—and life itself—through a sublime experience. All Stockhausen does is follow this notion through to its conceptual limits. As defined by affective incomparability, the sublime is an experience that belongs to terror and death as much as, or more than, it belongs to non-violent wonders. Unless aesthetics exclusively appears in acts and objects that are fundamentally nice, kind, or polite, then terror, death, and suffering belong no less to art than a Monet does. Stockhausen ethically falters, not in his recognition of 9/11 as art, but in his flippancy regarding the tragedy of so many lives lost. Rather than perceiving the contextualization of 9/11 as an aesthetic act as evidence of

ethical dismissiveness, it is politically relevant to recognize aesthetics as it is embedded in every kind of ethical embodiment, including ethical horrors. To do this is to acknowledge and grapple with the true complexities of ethical life. In order to flesh out this notion, I will discuss relevant examples of artworks and artists who give the impression of conflicting with Stockhausen's conception of art, yet resemble it ideologically.

The artist team of Christo and Jean-Claude has spent the last four decades creating large-scale environmental art. Their 1970 to 1972 project, "Valley Curtain", located in Rifle, Colorado, involved hanging 142,000 square feet of woven orange nylon fabric 1,368 feet high and seven miles wide. From 1980 to 1983, Christo and Jean-Claude worked on their project, "Surrounded Islands", in Miami, Florida. This project consisted of surrounding 11 islands with 585,000 square meters of pink woven polypropylene fabric, floating and extending 200 feet from each island into the bay. In reference to why they make their art so big, Christo and Jean-Claude reply that it is to "see and perceive the whole environment with new eyes and a new consciousness" (Church, 2009).

In her account of art as innately moralistically good, Iris Murdoch (1999) falls into the same Stockhausen trap of defining good art as "something pre-eminently outside us and resistant to our consciousness", in which we will "surrender ourselves to its authority" (p. 200). Like 9/11 and the work of Christo and Jean-Claude, Murdoch identifies the purpose of art as that which reveals "the only sense in which the permanent and incorruptible is compatible with the transient; and whether representational or not it reveals to us aspects of our world which our ordinary dull dream-consciousness is unable to see" (1999, p. 200). Under the rubric of both performance and environmental art, 9/11 and the "Surrounded

Islands” share the ideological desire of an artistic sensibility that endeavours to create sublime transformation.

As an act of convulsiveness and of “vandalism”, would 9/11 be classified in Siebers as disability aesthetics? If so, what does this tell us about why disability aesthetics is valued in art? Does disability represent an always applicable embodied citation of the terrifying, wondrous, and extraordinary properties of the sublime?

French feminist artist Orlan inverts the sublime within the scope of her body by using it “as a medium of transformation...to deconstruct the mythological images of women” (cited in Korsmeyer, 1999, p. 161). Orlan’s project, “Reincarnation of Saint Orlan” (1990–1993), involved her choosing one feature from Renaissance female portraits that were each defined by their male painters as representations of “Ideal Beauty”: the chin of Bitticelli’s *Venus*, the eyes of Francoise Gerard’s *Psyche*, the forehead of Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, and the mouth of Boucher’s *Europa* (Orlan, 2009). Orlan then underwent a series of cosmetic surgeries that reformatted her face to mimic the features she chose. Her surgery was taped, spectacularized, and contextualized as performance art.

The irony of Orlan’s work is that each surgery took her further and further away from any representation of the Ideal Beauty, yet her appearance continually grew in affectivity. Orlan became non-normative, strange; her transformation involved taking an established idea and shaking, startling, defamiliarizing, and estranging it by inscribing variation onto her body. Orlan’s decoupage face represented the power of the negative pleasure of the sublime. She stripped the film of ideological familiarity through employing disability aesthetics. Kant defined art as the beautiful representation of something, because

it can make “even the ugly appear beautiful” (cited in Korsmeyer, 1999, p. 97). Orlan used past notions of the beautiful in art to, more or less, vandalize herself. But is Orlan’s use of disability aesthetics ethical?

Ferris (2008) describes Crip poetry as coming from the outside or the abnormal in order to centre the experience of being out of the ordinary. Ferris continues to define Crip poetry as the prospect and aspiration for transformation. In Crip poetry, incommensurability resides in representing the lives of disabled people in nuanced, somatic, tactile ways in order to reverse normative perspectives and revolutionize consciousness. Crip poetry refashions the imagination so that culture will perceive “the wide and startling variety of rich and fulfilling ways that real people live, love, work and play in this world” (Ferris, 2008, p. 1). The extreme difference yet ideological sameness (transformation) between Orlan and Crip poetry demonstrates how the full swing of the politico-aesthetic spectrum is moralized by the same assumption: good art is sublime. Where Crip poetry diverges is in its acknowledgment and centralization of disability. Does Crip poetry jeopardize its cultural cache by outing disability as its muse, purpose, and political device?

In “The Enfreakment of Photography”, David Hevey (2006) condemns the career of photographer Diane Arbus for unjustly representing disabled people in her work. Hevey criticizes Arbus for cultivating asymmetrical power relationships between herself and her disabled subjects, as well as for fetishizing disabled people as symbols of taboo, or the forbidden. Hevey makes the claim that Arbus disembodied her disabled subjects by reducing them to a representation of her “dysfunctional” psyche, stating that she “read the

bodily impairment of her disabled subject as a sign of disorder, even chaos; that is, a physical manifestation of her chaos” (2006, p. 370).

Whether Hevey’s critique of Arbus is accurate, Hevey is correct in stating there is nothing new about “‘reading’ the visual site of a disabled person away from a personal value into a symbolic value which then seals the representational fate of the disabled person” (2006, p. 370). This dynamic of disembodiment of disability as a representation of the “dysfunctional psyche” is also perpetuated in the work of McCarthy and Orlan, for both artistic empires are indebted and constituted by the real-life existence of disability in order to negate disability by making it a symbol for something else. Perhaps disability aesthetics is code word for picturing (only to disembody and misidentify) disorder, chaos, wonder, and pain that can shake us from our dull, dream-like consciousness.

Would disability still constitute the beautiful in art if the majority of real-life recognized disability as common, natural, and beautiful? Or does art evoke images of disability because it is perceived as alien, menacing, and exceptional? In reference to the salience of the ethos of the freak show in contemporary exhibitions of non-normative bodies, Elizabeth Stevens (2005) argues that current audiences remain spellbound by the exhibition and faculties provided by exceptional bodies. Allure can have nothing to do with respect, justice, or even (as Siebers’s “Disability Aesthetics” demonstrates) basic acknowledgement. Hence, in art, the beautiful is that which disrupts normal reactions, normal perceptions, normal life, where normal life is about keeping things normal. If disability is central to good art, to the beautiful in art, this could be because disability is perceived as that deviant, that much of a powerful disruption from normal life.

Tanya Titchkosky (2003) claims: “Disability is considered ‘far out’ in every sense of the word” (p. 150). To provide an alternate, and quite dismal, possible answer to Siebers initial question: representations of disability within art may have greater material existence in comparison to other aesthetic representations because disability has more greatly been “Othered” from everyday material existence and is therefore perceived as “sublime” when represented within art. Siebers (2006) argues, “it is to be expected that the disabled body and mind always elicit powerful emotions” (p. 67). If it is the intensity of emotions that draws discourses of art to the disabled body, this is not necessarily a good thing. Could it be that the majority of contemporary art is a freak show in drag?

Disability Aesthetics: Appropriate Kitsch

Normal has inflected beautiful in modernity (Garland-Thomson, 2002, p. 11).

The 19th century birth of statistics marked an ideological shift in which averageness became the ideal and utopic mode of subjectivity in North American culture (Davis, 2002). Embodying the norm became the epitome of one’s desires, aspirations, and imagination, as well as a site of disturbance, disconnect, and stigma for those who deviated. As Michael Warner (1999) claims, “normal probably outranks all other social aspirations” (p. 53). However, conceptions of normal are cultivated through ableism, which is defined by Gregor Wolbring (2008) as the system that favours certain abilities over others in order to crystallize cherished traits into essential traits. The concept of the norm is formulated through selves in possession of essential abilities that are gauged in relation to species-typical functioning.

Lennard J. Davis (2002) argues that people in Disability Studies have generally made the mistake of restraining critiques concerning normality to impairment and disease. Nonetheless, normality is an overarching ideological system that cannot be localized to bodies. The norm has infected and fused with the bloodstream of contemporary culture; its embeddedness is molecular. Sexuality, morality, economics, architecture, language, gender, imagination, education, media, religion, eating practices, fashion, hard science, soft moments, power, justice, kitchen utensils, and romance are all involved and influenced, or they are omitted or extricated from the omnipresent discourse of modern day normality.

Normality as an ethic expressed through, and formulated by, ableist aesthetics is explicated in Michel Foucault's (1977) notion of "docile bodies". Foucault defines docile bodies as bodies that have been disciplined to make possible "the meticulous control of the operations of the body" (1977, p. 74). The docile body is a discursive re-conception of subjectivity through the utilization of the body as a "machinery of power" (1977, p. 74) with the purpose of producing maximum efficiency. The docile body, as generated through systems of hegemony to produce maximum effect, is a highly circulated and replicated body. Replication forms pattern, and circulation creates presence. The relationship between presence and pattern produces the contradictory effect of hyper-real naturalization⁵.

Through replication and circulation, the hyper-real docile body populates and dominates

⁵ This notion of pattern and presence, as well as circulation and presence is inspired by N. Katherine Hayles's (1999) semiotic square, which has two central dialects. Presence/absence is set along the primary axis, and pattern/randomness is set along the secondary axis. Hayles elucidates that "presence and randomness gives rise to mutation" whereas "the interplay between absence and pattern can be called, following Jean Baudrillard, hyper-reality" (1999, p.251). Thus, within North American normate culture, the hyper-reality of the docile body creates a dynamic in which normality is present even in absence through hyper-replication. This creates a situation in which disability is perceived as absent and random. Disability disrupts the illusion of (omni)presence by tearing a hole in pattern.

articulations of subjectivity, taking on the appearance of “normal” (Baudrillard, 1991).

Through constant reiteration, the normality of the body becomes the naturalization of the body—yet this is never more, never anything other, than the standardization of the body.

The production of normality interlocks with the process of naturalization, and both projects are mutually constitutive and equally mythic. Subjects that refuse or fail to conform to docility are stigmatized, perceived as blemished: “stigmatized person is a blemished, not quite human person” (Titchkosky, 2003, p. 141). The docile body is the power of ideology written on the body. The modern holder of full citizenship rights is paradoxically personified and humanized through discourses of machinery, simulacra, and maximized efficiency. No wonder disability is “‘far out’ in every sense of the word” (Titchkosky, 2003, p. 150).

The docile body, through simulacra, mutates the materiality of the body into iconography. It transforms the body into a coding process, designed to enter and refuse entrance to a meticulously controlled system of embodiment. Davide Panagia (2006) claims, “our understandings of political life are informed by our aesthetic sensibilities” (p. 2). The normative aesthetic of standardization acts as metaphor for ableist values and notions of what it means to be human.

In the article “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance”, bell hooks (1992) critiques how the modes of inclusion that constitute contemporary quests for diversity reassert an ahistorical account of white-washed commodification of “The Other”. hooks argues: “The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling” (1992, p. 21). She

goes on to explain how race and ethnicity, within commodity culture, become the “spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture” (1992, p. 21). hooks’s notion of delight and satisfaction found in racial Otherness articulates how the design of normate commodity culture is built around the mass production of “familiarity”, in which the docile body mushrooms into the realm of omnipresence. The normalization of contemporary culture inverts democratic citizenship to simulacric citizenship, reduces the phenomenology of existence, and shrinks modes of doing and feeling into the sum total of replication (of ableist embodiment) and consumption (of internalizing, purchasing, and enforcing ableist embodiment).

The comprehensive and ubiquitous disciplining and warp-speed reproduction of normality ultimately result in paradox. The aestheticization of bodies generated through the systematics of kitsch involves nationalizing human identity into that which can be demarcated by a set of characteristics that fit into nationalist discourse, and those that do not. Human and kitsch become synonyms. This creates a problem regarding the placement of those subjects whose minds and bodies cannot be kitsched.

Playwright Alistair Newton (2009) discusses the controversial career of Leni Riefenstahl, Hitler’s go-to filmmaker in Nazi Germany. Newton’s recent play, “Leni Riefenstahl vs. the 20th Century”, explores the complicated political meanings implicit in how Riefenstahl could align herself with advancing the reality of Hitler’s genocidal fantasies without being anti-Semitic. Newton makes sense of Riefenstahl’s apolitical participation in Hitler’s Germany as symptomatic of her kitschy aesthetic. As Hal Foster (2005) claims, kitsch “cuts across culture and politics instrumentally to the detriment of

both” (p. 25), and as such, it is what Newton defines as the “fascist aesthetic”. This fascist aesthetic, Newton argues, has interestingly always been a homoerotic aesthetic—and as Tamar Mayer (2000) explicates, a Zionist aesthetic as well, thus aesthetically uniting mainstream gay culture, anti-Semitism, and Zionism under the seemingly apolitical rubric of kitsch. Newton explains how the attractive male forms of buff male athletes and German male soldiers showcased an image of the cold and inert human body that was prized as the ideal manifestation of perfect physical beauty.

Newton claims that kitsch has lingered as an extended hangover into contemporary culture, as it dominates the embodied aesthetic field of “gay gym culture, pornography, contemporary action films, and the Abercrombie and Fitch catalogue” (2009, p. 11). The totalitarian function of kitsch aesthetic is such that we have a popular culture saturated with homoerotic representations of the body while homophobia continues to blaze in a rosy glow of naïveté.

Newton’s article elucidates how, in modern day culture, the docile body is a kitsch body—and the kitsch body, an ableist ideal. Gay and straight, trans and cisgendered, racialized and non-racialized, young and old, conservative and radical, non-disabled and disabled have all been translated into kitsch aesthetic. It is not that current North American culture is less oppressive and more tolerant of diversity. On the contrary, normalcy as kitsch has created the scenario in which experiences of racism, homophobia, transphobia, ageism, classism, and even ableism can be alleviated by personifying kitsch aesthetic. Thus, when Davis (2002) elucidates how “normalcy and linguistic standardization began at

roughly the same time”, and unite “under the rubric of nationalism” (p. 3), I would argue that they merge through the implementation of bodies as kitsch.

There are many forms of disability that inhibit the ability to enact the compulsory embodiment of normate kitsch scripture. The kitsch aesthetic—though some disabled subjects may be “able” to manoeuvre passing—is exclusively an ableist aesthetic. This incorporates the disenfranchisement of racialized, sexualized, and less-moneyed Others due to their missing of corresponding cherished traits. For example, in climates where whiteness is considered an essential trait, people of colour will be framed as deficient; in climates where heterosexuality is perceived as an essential trait, queer people will be contextualized under the rubric of impairment; in a capitalistic culture that valorizes economic competitiveness, having low income or not engaging in the paid economy will be constructed as blemished.

Jim Downs (2008) provides a poignant example of kitsch as an exclusively ableist form of cultural mobility when he explicates the ways in which the emancipation of slaves was restricted to the liberation of able-bodied slaves. While able-bodied people of colour were able to physically leave the plantation and join the workforce, disabled African Americans who were physically unable to exit the plantation, and were unaccounted for in the paid workforce, often remained chained to their previous duties of serving their white masters. Thus, what is known as the end of slavery was, more specifically, the end of slavery for able-bodied people of colour.

Tamar Mayer (2000) discusses the Zionist invention of “The Muscle Jew” as born out of the need to “free the Jews of Europe from their constant battles with anti-Semitism”

by constructing a hyper-able-bodied soldier, with the body of a gymnast, as the New Jew. Nordau, one of the leaders of Zionism, claimed that “ghetto Jews”, with their “limp” and “frail” bodies and relationship to intellectualism and the arts, likened them to “degenerates” (2000, p. 286–287). In so doing, Nordau, along with other Zionists, conceptualized the emancipation from anti-Semitism as possible by escaping comparability with degeneracy through the brute force of able-bodied kitsch embodiment, which was simultaneously utilized as the basis and symbol for the Jewish nation-state. Accordingly, able-bodiedness sometimes conceptually or materially ameliorates the level of disenfranchisement an individual will endure. The end of slavery, along with the Muscle Jew, is indicative of the divergent ways in which the prioritization of the body as machinery of power has been expressed when considering intersectional identities, oppression, and emancipation.

As an iconographic ideology of subjectivity, embodied normality does not just encapsulate the physical appearance of the body as machinery of power, but also the meticulous control of the machine as a whole. The objective of Davide Panagia’s (2006) text, “A Poetics of Political Thinking”, is to be “attuned to the normative dimensions of the technologies of evaluation . . . of competence that govern political participation” (p. 9). Within normative modes of ethical political thought, Panagia explains how “an inappropriate style obfuscates the content” (2006, p. 11). He continues, arguing “the a priori insistence that one’s utterances always be coherent is more than an attempt to rationalize political discourse; it stands as a condition of sincerity that restricts available forms of democratic action” (2006, p. 17).

The insistence that one's utterances always be coherent depends on the a priori assumption that coherence is a definable, knowable phenomenon. But the only way in which coherence can be seamlessly identified and enforced is through the regulation of a particular style, that is, through the process of replication and standardization, deemed appropriate. Accordingly, "the kind of language we use, its tone, cadence, and appearance—carry ethical weight in that they count as systems of control that qualify access to the institutions of power in our political systems" (Panagia, 2006, p. 9).

In the milieu of normate kitsch culture, coherence and competence are a matter of readability and simulacra. Embodiments that deviate from the hyper-real presence of docile subjectivity are thus perceived as a severe and rare mutation from the dominance of the norm, interpreted as incoherent, chaotic, and faulty. An example of this is the story of a quadriplegic woman, Ruth, who communicated by smiling, frowning, making vocalizations, and facial expressions (Stefans, 1993). Once her parents became elderly, Ruth was sent to an institution in which she was labelled "imbecile" and treated as if she was not sentient. It was through forming bonds with other residents that Ruth began to communicate again with others. The staff did not notice Ruth communicating because "she had been presented to them as an imbecile" (Stefans, 1993, p. 1). Once, by sheer chance, two attendants in the room noticed Ruth communicating. It was from this that Ruth was given a communication board. Now Ruth has started a family and is writing her memoirs.

In "A Voice Unheard: The Latimer Case and People with Disabilities", Ruth Enns (1999) discusses how Laura and Robert Latimer turned down a recommended surgery for their daughter, Tracy, on the basis that it would result in her being "mutilated" (p. 3). In

court, after Tracy's murder, Enns argues that the defence's description of Tracy's never-to-be surgery was, "grotesquely dehumanizing: 'in effect sawing off the leg but cosmetically leaving it dangling there'" (1999, p. 12). Enns argues that this articulation framed Tracy in such a way that her "leg would not have been a part of her body, as though she had been a collection of defective body parts and the surgery would have rendered her life even less valuable than before" (1999, p. 12). In the second trial, the defence added that her leg would be "flailing around there" and "flopping" (1999, p. 12). Robert Latimer, on the other hand, was constructed as benevolent in murdering his daughter, his motives were "normal human instinct...the only reasonable course" (1999, p. 12).

The experiences of Ruth and Tracy articulate the ways in which an "inappropriate" (non-normative) style—whether linguistic and/or physical—not only obfuscates the content, but is misunderstood as lack of content, void of sentience. The true function of kitsch is "to curtain off", above all, the reality of "shit and death"—while simultaneously killing difference off (Foster, 2005, p. 29).

In this milieu of politico-aesthetic stringency, any slight deviation from the perceived norm is hyperbolized, monstrosized, and stigmatized. Yet inevitably, the tight rigidity of mass normality thrusts hegemony into a realm of lacklustre predictability—a prosaic daze, in which it becomes more and more difficult to feel. Thus, subjects who fall under the rubric of normality may feel burdened by the banality of their object of mimicry and consumption, and thus learn to manage and internalize the weight of obligation involved in adhering to kitsch. Because kitschy cuisine cannot satisfy the complexities and various longings of the human appetite for existence, racialized and disabled Others have

been the spice and the seasoning that liven up the dull dish of white-washed, ableist predictability.

Portholes of temporary escapism and release become a necessary fixture within the construct of normate culture. The effect of “consumer cannibalism” not only “displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other’s history through a process of decontextualization” (hooks, 1992, p. 31). Entertainment and art are “outs” in which the real and commonness of human variation are spectacularized, fetishized, and freaked—and as such, presented as outside of human discourse. Othered bodies are simultaneously adorned and gawked at through the voyeuristic gaze of the various and versatile, high and low, cultural texts of the secularized arts. As hooks claims, “fantasies about the Other can be continually exploited...such exploitation will occur in a manner that re-inscribes and maintains the status quo” (1992, p. 22). Because there is no recognition, accountability, or justice connected to arts preoccupation and favouring of disability as its primary aesthetic, the value embedded in disability aesthetics is a decontextualized flirting with difference in the safe space of misty, unarticulated representation in order to abandon the encounter less bored. Disability aesthetics is yet another spice that seasons normate culture. Art is the kitschy way to encounter difference.

hooks’s greatest fear is that “cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate—that the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten” (1992, p. 39). I share her alarm as it is presented with disability aesthetics, in which disability is placed as an object of consumption, always and continually being eaten by the norm.

Conclusion

Disability aesthetics is fundamental to art within normate-kitsch culture because it provides contact with the intense, unusual, and shocking. It is a spectacularized, once removed, representational deviance from the humdrum normalization of North American culture. This essay discussed the ethical and political significations of disability aesthetics by first examining the beautiful in art as dependent on evoking feelings of sublime transformation. I then argued that disability aesthetics plays the role of the trickster, as representations of disability are often disembodied—perceived as symbolic of the “mad” artist’s convulsive psyche. Building on these points, I contextualized normalcy as an ableist aesthetic movement intimately tied to kitsch. Within kitsch culture, art is a secure place to experience, respond, flirt, and then abandon perceived difference in the vortex of representation. Art is situated in a paradoxical zone in which the gestures of transformation occur in the safety-net of image while temporarily escaping, but not disobeying, the hyper-real predictability of normate hegemony. Disability aesthetics does not challenge—rather it reinforces—the veracity in which the only acceptable aesthetic in real life is the norm.

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