Toward a Relational Aesthetic in Disability Art: Interdependence and Crip Futurity

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Introduction

Disability art is political and has the power to disrupt normative understandings of disability and disabled life. Through a critical analysis of Lisa Bufano’s (2010) *Mentally Fine*, I explore various constitutions of disability aesthetics. I argue that we need to push past the binary of ugly and beautiful in our understandings of disability aesthetics and move toward one of unapologetic, proud and embodied difference. As difference and disability can only be understood in relation, I employ Nicolas Bourriaud’s (2002) concept of relational aesthetics and argue that a disability aesthetic is one of interdependence. I assert that this relation incites critical self-reflexivity in the encounters with Bufano’s art that can shift our understandings of disability from tragedy to opportunity for a new kind of vital connected crip future.

Lisa Bufano’s *Mentally Fine* in Context

While disability art is emerging as a recognized arts sector, disability arts and culture holds an integral role in the rich histories of the disability rights and justice movements (Gorman, 2011; Reid, 2016). Abbas, Church, Frazee, and Panitch (2004) write
Disability Arts and Culture marks the growing political power of disabled people over their narratives, as disabled artists use it to counter cultural misrepresentation, establish disability as a valued human condition, shift control to disabled people so they may shape their narratives and bring this disability controlled narrative to wider audiences. (p.1)

Although disability art is a contested and evolving movement and practice, this working definition is useful as it highlights several key elements of the genre. First, disability art is political. It is concerned with resisting dominant representations of disabled people and disabled lives that often construct disability as a problem in need of solution, as tragedy, and/or through a discourse of pity and charity (Rice, Chandler, & Changfoot, 2016). It disrupts these narratives by offering multiple representations of disability experience that celebrate and desire disabled life and disability community. Disability art can, for example, be a means to reclaim sexuality for disabled people or to understand Madness not as something that requires correction but rather a different way of being in the world that is valid in and of itself (Chandler & Rice, 2013). Second, this definition requires that disability art be disability-led. Appropriation and exploitation of disability art is a reality and the movement continues to contend with institutions that wish to support disability art while at the same time leaving behind a critical disability politic (Gorman, 2011). For the messages and counter-narratives in disability art to be authentic and advance disability justice, they must remain in the control of disabled people. Third, disability art involves releasing works outside of the politicized disability art community and engaging in the work of dismantling ableist systems. It is about challenging the broader public to relocate the ‘problem’ of disability in the social, to reimagine disabled existence as valuable and vital, and to assume responsibility for movement towards disability justice. In this way, disability art can be considered a form of activism.

Lisa Bufano’s (2010) Mentally Fine is a compelling piece of disability performance art. Bufano, a disabled dancer, is in a window gallery space at street level. The artist is dancing with four beautiful long table legs, which she crafted herself and uses as prosthetics.
Bufano begins on the ground and in slow sinuous movements, eventually moves herself on top of the table legs. Towards the beginning of the video, two women approach the window and engage in discussion with the videographer. The women probe the videographer with an ableist line of questioning concerned with Bufano’s disabled body as well as the artist’s intention and capacity. Bufano’s animation of the repurposed table legs as well as her decision to publish a video that captures interactions with her art is political because she is disrupting normative understandings of dance and disability. Rather than adapting to traditional dance practices that might require able-bodiedness and a set of prescribed movements, Bufano transforms herself entirely in her art generating new shapes and movements (Ware & Sweeney, 2014). In addition, Bufano is in control of the representation of disability in her art through her decision to occupy public space. The artist is resisting the sideshow discourse and challenging passers-by to both critically examine what they are looking at as well as critically self-reflect on their own emotions as they engage with her work (Eisenhauer, 2007).

**Busting the Ugly/Beautiful Binary**

Bufano’s *Mentally Fine* can be analyzed in the context of disability aesthetics, a concept that remains contested in the disability art community. As a definition, theorist Tobin Siebers (2005) writes, “[a]esthetics tracks the emotions that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies” and specific to disability aesthetics he asserts “[d]isability aesthetics seeks to emphasize the presence of different bodies and minds in the tradition of aesthetic representation – that tradition concerned most precisely with the appearance of the beautiful” (p. 542-543). From these thoughts, we can extricate that disability aesthetics involve emotional response, interaction, and difference. Therefore, the subversive artistic movement represented in Bufano’s performance art can be understood as a disability aesthetic. In addition, from Siebers’ (2005) definition, we can appreciate that a traditional normative understanding of aesthetics is one that is related to the category of ‘beautiful’. In sharp contrast, Mia Mingus (2011) argues that disability community must “shift from a politic
of desirability and beauty to a politic of ugly and magnificence,” that we must dismantle beauty and respect the ugly that has shaped us, understanding it to be a strength and a power within us that is magnificent.

Is a disability aesthetic then, one of beauty or ugliness? I contend that disability aesthetics requires us to dismantle the binary of ugly and beautiful. Considerations of beauty and ugliness are highly significant and political. While Mia Mingus (2011) urges us to move entirely toward a politic of ugliness in order to take back the power both mainstream society and disability community has ascribed to beauty, this is potentially equally as damaging as moving entirely towards beauty. For example, Loree Erickson (2007) discusses how a politicized femme identity in relation to queerness and disability can be reclaimative and a site of resistance. Theorizing disability aesthetics involves reconceptualizing these categories and negotiating their limits and possibilities. Breaking down and complexifying the binary of beauty and ugliness allows disabled artists to propel forward an aesthetic of disability that is valuable in and of itself and a representation of unapologetic, proud, embodied difference. However, the categories of beauty, ugliness and even difference can only be understood in relation. Powerful normative understandings of beauty and desirability continue to construct disabled people as other. This notwithstanding, every person that interacts with disability art brings with them different subjectivities, histories and lived experiences which inform their understandings of disability and therefore their appreciation of disability aesthetic value. Thus a disability aesthetic is not fixed; rather, it is fluid and constantly shifting in relationship with the audiences of disability art.

**Relational Aesthetics in Disability Art**

French curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud coined the concept of relational aesthetics in his book of the same name. In the book, Bourriaud (2002) defines relational art as “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space” (p. 113). By choosing
to perform in a window gallery located on a public street, Bufano occupied public space. The artist intervened on folks walking by and effectively curated an interactive social experience. Many disabled people experience the daily reality of being stared and gawked at, of being the object of violent looking (Clare, 2003; Eisenhauer, 2007). Bufano likely anticipated that her public performance would result in such staring and proceeded with the art with knowledge of this risk. Her deliberate choice to take up this public, uncontrolled space demonstrates her critical appropriation of this staring (Eisenhauer, 2007). She is effectively staring right back, implicating the lookers in a relation and challenging them to examine their own personal reactions, thoughts, and emotions as they continue to gaze. This resistance transforms spectators into participants in the art, which can open up conversations and teach us about new meanings of disability.

Bufano, a disabled dancer embodying a disability aesthetic in her work is engaging in the risk and vulnerability of performing in a public space with no didactics, no artist statement and only one ally in the videographer. In the video the women question Bufano’s humanness and body through questions such as “Is that a person?” and “But is she handicapped?” (Bufano, 2010). They then go on to question the artist’s capacity and intention by asking the videographer if Bufano is “mentally fine” and if “she came up with the idea” for her art (Bufano, 2010). The women’s violent and oppressive line of questioning is an example of what disabled artists have to contend with and the risks that they subject themselves to when they release their work into the public. I argue that the women are engaging in art vandalism through their comments and questions. The women are attacking Bufano’s performance with ableism, sexism and heteronormativity. Consistent with Siebers (2002), I argue that the vandalism does not lead to the destruction or diminishing of the performance art. Rather it is an act that is creative as it pushes the work to new places and generates new emotional responses (Siebers, 2002). Though I have constructed the women in the video as art vandals, importantly I am not suggesting that their attack is produced as a result of individual pathology. Instead, it is an interpersonal aggres-
sion on difference that is informed by the oppressive structures, ide-
ologies, and discourses that pervade every system in our lives. The
women’s participation in the art through a relational aesthetic not
only transforms the live dance performance into a pedagogical and
aesthetically different video (indeed it informs the title of the vid-
eo); the encounter also has the potential to transform the women,
possibly shifting their understandings of disability, and imbuing new
feelings within them toward a disability aesthetic. Towards the end
of the interaction, one of the women expresses “We must sound hor-
rrible” (Bufano, 2010). I contend that this is indicative of the begin-
ning of some reflexive work and perhaps marks a shift in thinking in
relation to disability. The encounter therefore exemplifies the activist
potential of disability art.

A Disability Aesthetic of Interdependence

Building upon an understanding of disability aesthetics as re-
lational, it is my proposal that a disability aesthetic is also one of
interdependence. Our neoliberal Western capitalist society contrib-
utes to a ‘myth of independence’ (Taylor, 2004; Mingus, 2010). In
this context, independence, autonomy, and self-sufficiency are held
up as the pinnacle of success for human existence. This of course is
unachievable and false for all human beings and I argue disability is
most apt to disrupt this myth. Disabled people are more obviously
dependent and in need of care through accessibility devices, technol-
ogy, care attendants, prosthetics, and medications, for example, to
survive. A false belief in the ideal of total self-sufficiency constructs
disabled people as tragically dependent (Taylor, 2004). This notion
of disability as tragedy is exemplified in the video when one of the
women shares “I can relate, I almost ended up an amputee,” (Bufa-
no, 2010). The idea of disability as an end is intimately bound up in
a fear of dependency and loss of agency. This fear is founded in part,
as we are not currently living in a society that desires disability and
difference and therefore does not provide its citizens with robust
support systems that effectively and comprehensively respond to di-
verse care and accessibility needs.

I contend that the concept of interdependence can shift nor-
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attentive understandings of disability as tragedy and change harmful conceptions of dependence and care being a burden. Kelly Fritsch’s (2010) concept of intimate assemblages challenges ideas about disabled people being entirely dependent beings and passive recipients of care. Rather, this concept of assemblage captures how beings and objects can engage in reciprocal relationships that actively produce and reproduce each other. The fluid interdependence generates new ways of being in the world in relation for all people (Fritsch, 2010). Perhaps dependence is one reason disability experience is normatively constructed as undesirable and ugly. Mia Mingus (2011) asks two critical questions: “Where is the Ugly in you? What is it trying to teach you?” Bufano, in her embodiment of interdependence is asking something similar of the passers-by on the street. Aesthetics of interdependence are present in the relations between people and objects in Mentally Fine. Bufano is dependent on the repurposed table legs to create her fluid and interesting movement and the prosthetics are dependent on Bufano to be incorporated in this dancing. The windowpane provides the space and is the conduit through which passers-by become participants in the art. The artist that is filming is implicated in this as well as they field the women’s questions and remain in solidarity with Bufano’s intent, contributing to the pedagogy of the piece. These dynamic multidirectional interactions converge to generate and regenerate the art piece. Most significantly, through Bufano’s art, which engenders a relational disability aesthetic that unapologetically represents and reclaims interdependence, the women are compelled to enter into an adversarial moment. They are compelled to be self-reflexive about their own ugliness or dependence or relationship to disability and embodied difference. This is the moment where an understanding of disability as tragedy can shift to an understanding of disability as opening up an opportunity for a vital future in difference and in meaningful reciprocal relationships.

Desiring Difference and Crippling Our Future

We are living in a time where the right to access life for disabled people is being debated and where crip futures are predominantly
imagined as curative (McBryde Johnson, 2003; Kafer, 2013). Kelly Fritsch (2012) writes that to crip is to open up with desire to the disruption that disability makes. Crip is therefore at once a politi
cized reclamative identity as well as a practice of being in the world differently (Fritsch, 2012). Kafer (2013) writes that we need to shift from an understanding of disability as final and tragic and “imagine disability and disability futures otherwise” (p. 34). She argues for crip futures that welcome disabled people, desire difference and support many different ways of being in our bodies and interacting with the world (Kafer, 2013). Embracing the interdependence inherent in disabled lives and disability community is one way to reimagine a crip future. In the context of Western neoliberalism, Chandler and Rice (2013) explore how disabled people’s happiness in difference disrupts and resists our culture of pervasive individualism and personal responsibility. Kafer (2013) discusses a hope that is born out of the despair about our impoverished imaginations. We can look to art for direction on how to overcome this failure of imagination (Chandler & Rice, 2013; Ware & Sweeney, 2014).

Disability art is political and actively agitates and disrupts our understanding of disability through a relational aesthetic of interde
pendence. An aesthetic of interdependence challenges us to embrace our humanness, requires us to be self-reflexive and understand that vulnerability is “the ground for human exchange, empowerment, and growth” (Rice, Chandler, & Changfoot, 2016, p.67). Passers-by on the street during Lisa Bufano’s window gallery performance in 2010 were challenged to examine their own emotional responses to her aesthetic and representation of disability. They were compelled to ask themselves where their own vulnerabilities, interdependencies, and differences are and to understand them as opportunities for a different kind of life that is happy and in community. Disability art that engenders a disability aesthetic that is relational and interdep
dent can push us to understand disability’s disruption as generative and transformative. Collectively and in long-term relations with one another, we can then do work to dismantle the systems that maintain the ranks of the privileged and open up space for vital connected crip futures (Mingus, 2010; Reid, 2016).
Conclusion

Lisa Bufano’s (2010) *Mentally Fine* is a piece of disability performance art that is powerful and pedagogical. Through the artist’s unapologetic representation of embodied difference, her work engenders a disability aesthetic that dismantles binary conceptions of beauty and ugliness. Bufano critically appropriates the staring that disabled people are routinely subjected to and transforms spectators into participants in her art (Eisenhauer, 2007). Bourriaud’s (2002) concept of relational aesthetics opens up conversations and experiences between people that can shift our understandings of disability. In neoliberal times, we can understand an aesthetic of dependence as an end and a tragedy. Through an aesthetic of interdependence, we can open ourselves up to thinking about disability as an opportunity for a new kind of life. Disability art has the power to transform our understandings of disability and imagine a crip future that is rooted in community and interdependence. Movement toward a relational aesthetic in disability art implicates all of us in this reimagining.

References


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**Author Bio**

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