

Chapter 1

Introducing Disability Aesthetics

Aesthetics tracks the sensations that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies. This notion of aesthetics, first conceived by Alexander Baumgarten, posits the human body and its affective relation to other bodies as foundational to the appearance of the beautiful—and to such a powerful extent that aesthetics suppresses its underlying corporeality only with difficulty. The human body is both the subject and object of aesthetic production: the body creates other bodies prized for their ability to change the emotions of their maker and endowed with a semblance of vitality usually ascribed only to human beings. But all bodies are not created equal when it comes to aesthetic response. Taste and disgust are volatile reactions that reveal the ease or disease with which one body might incorporate another. The senses revolt against some bodies, while other bodies please them. These responses represent the corporeal substrata on which aesthetic effects are based. Nevertheless, there is a long tradition of trying to replace the underlying corporeality of aesthetics with idealist and disembodied conceptions of art. For example, the notion of “disinterestedness,” an ideal invented in the eighteenth century but very much alive today, separates the pleasures of art from those of the body, while the twentieth-century notion of “opticality” denies the bodily character of visual perception. The result is a nonmaterialist aesthetics that devalues the role of the body and limits the definition of art.

There are some recent trends in art, however, that move beyond idealism to invoke powerful emotional responses to the corporeality of aesthetic objects. Andy Warhol's car crashes and other disaster paintings represent the fragility of the human body with an explicitness rarely found in the history of art. Nam June Paik, Carolee Schneemann, Mary Duffy, Marc Quinn, and Chris Burden turn their own bodies into instruments or works of art, painting with their face or hair, having themselves shot with guns, sculpting their frozen blood, and exhibiting themselves in situations both ordinary and extraordinary. Paul McCarthy, Tyree Guyton, and Damien Hirst employ substances thought to be beyond the bounds of art: food-stuff, wreckage, refuse, debris, body parts. Curiously, the presence of these materials makes the work of art seem more real, even though all aesthetic objects have, because of their material existence, an equal claim to being real. Nevertheless, such works of art are significant neither because they make art appear more realistic nor because they discover a new terrain for aesthetics. They are significant because they return aesthetics forcefully to its originary subject matter: the body and its affective sphere.

Works of art engaged explicitly with the body serve to critique the assumptions of idealist aesthetics, but they also have an unanticipated effect that will be the topic of my investigation here. Whether or not we interpret these works as aesthetic, they summon images of disability. Most frequently, they register as wounded or disabled bodies, representations of irrationality or cognitive disability, or effects of warfare, disease, or accidents. How is disability related to artistic mimesis—or what Erich Auerbach called “the representation of reality”? Why do we see representations of disability as having a greater material existence than other aesthetic representations? Since aesthetic feelings of pleasure and disgust are difficult to separate from political feelings of acceptance and rejection, what do objects representing disability tell us about the ideals of political community underlying works of art?

Disability Aesthetics is meant to be a first attempt to theorize the representation of disability in modern art. What I am calling “disability aesthetics” names a critical concept that seeks to emphasize the presence of disability in the tradition of aesthetic representation. My argument here conceives of the disabled body and mind as playing significant roles in the evolution of modern aesthetics, theorizing disability as a unique resource discovered by modern art and then embraced by it as one of its defining

concepts. Disability aesthetics refuses to recognize the representation of the healthy body—and its definition of harmony, integrity, and beauty—as the sole determination of the aesthetic. Rather, disability aesthetics embraces beauty that seems by traditional standards to be broken, and yet it is not less beautiful, but more so, as a result. Note that it is not a matter of representing the exclusion of disability from aesthetic history, since no such exclusion has taken place, but of making the influence of disability obvious. This goal may take two forms: (1) to establish disability as a critical framework that questions the presuppositions underlying definitions of aesthetic production and appreciation; (2) to elaborate disability as an aesthetic value in itself worthy of future development.

My claim is that the acceptance of disability enriches and complicates notions of the aesthetic, while the rejection of disability limits definitions of artistic ideas and objects. In the modern period, disability acquires aesthetic value because it represents for makers of art a critical resource for thinking about what a human being is. Aesthetics is the human activity most identifiable with the human because it defines the process by which human beings attempt to modify themselves, by which they imagine their feelings, forms, and futures in radically different ways, and by which they bestow upon these new feelings, forms, and futures real appearances in the world. Disability does not express defect, degeneration, or deviancy in modern art. Rather, disability enlarges our vision of human variation and difference, and puts forward perspectives that test presuppositions dear to the history of aesthetics. Neither disabled artists nor disabled subjects are central to my argument, it will soon be evident, although interpretations of both appear in these pages. What is central is how specific artists and works force us to reconsider fundamental aesthetic assumptions and to embrace another aesthetics—what I call disability aesthetics. Disability aesthetics names the emergence of disability in modern art as a significant presence, one that shapes modern art in new ways and creates a space for the development of disabled artists and subjects. The many examples of disability aesthetics mustered here are arranged strategically to span time periods, cross national boundaries, and mix genres with the specific goal of revealing the aesthetic arguments by which disability contributes to the imagination of the human condition. Each chapter targets a particular set of arguments. Chapters 1 and 4 challenge the presuppositions about intelligence and cognitive ability underlying aesthetic notions of “vision,”

“intention,” “originality,” and “genius.” Chapter 2 questions standards of aesthetic beauty that rely on ideals of human beauty, in particular, those that disqualify human beings with reference to mental health, strength, and physical attractiveness. Chapter 3 focuses on the American culture wars as a way to think about how the defense mechanisms used to stave off the fear of individual disabled bodies jump to the symbolic and social level, creating disputes over the shape of the ideal body politic. Chapter 4 considers art vandalism as a new mode of representing disability that throws off the daunting burden of enfreakment troubling the traditional mimesis of disability. Chapter 5 presents a theoretical approach to disability that casts light on the aesthetic images of trauma, injury, wounding, and violence increasingly generated by the global world and transmitted by the media from nation to nation. Finally, chapter 6 explains the aesthetic prejudice against the image and in favor of words as the product of the image’s symbolic association with disability. These are but a few of the new questions that arise when traditional aesthetic arguments are addressed from the perspective of disability studies.

To argue that disability has a rich but hidden role in the history of art is not to say that disability has been excluded. It is rather the case that disability is rarely recognized as such, even though it often serves as the very factor that establishes works as superior examples of aesthetic beauty. To what concept, other than the idea of disability, might be referred modern art’s love affair with misshapen and twisted bodies, stunning variety of human forms, intense representation of traumatic injury and psychological alienation, and unyielding preoccupation with wounds and tormented flesh? Disability intercedes in the modern period to make the difference between good and bad art—and not as one would initially expect. That is, good art incorporates disability. Distinctions between good and bad art may seem troublesome, but only if one assumes that critical judgments are never applied in the art world—an untenable assumption. My point is only that works of art for which the argument of superiority is made tend to claim disability. This is hardly an absolute formula, although some have argued it, notably Francis Bacon and Edgar Allan Poe who found that “There is no exquisite beauty, without some strangeness in the proportion” (Poe 2:311–12) or André Breton who exclaimed that “Beauty will be *convulsive* or it will not be at all” (160).

Significantly, it could be argued that beauty always maintains an

underlying sense of disability and that increasing this sense over time may actually renew works of art that risk to fall out of fashion because of changing standards of taste. It is often the presence of disability that allows the beauty of an artwork to endure over time. Would the Venus de Milo still be considered one of the great examples of both aesthetic and human beauty if she had both her arms (fig. 1)? Perhaps it is an exaggeration to consider the Venus disabled, but René Magritte did not think so. He painted his version of the Venus, *Les Menottes de cuivre*, in flesh tones and colorful drapery but splashed blood-red pigment on her famous arm-stumps, giving the impression of a recent and painful amputation (color pl. 1).¹ Magritte's Venus exemplifies a discovery articulated repeatedly in modern art: the discovery of disability as a unique resource, recouped from the past and re-created in the present, for aesthetic creation and appreciation. The Venus de Milo is one of many works of art called beautiful by the tradition of modern aesthetic response, and yet it eschews the uniformity of perfect bodies to embrace the variety of disability.

To argue from the flip side, would Nazi art be considered kitsch if it had not pursued so relentlessly a bombastic perfection of the body? Sculpture and painting cherished by the Nazis exhibit a stultifying perfection of the human figure. Favored male statuary such as Arno Breker's *Readiness* displays bulked-up and gigantesque bodies that intimidate rather than appeal (fig. 2). The perfection of the bodies is the very mark of their unreality and lack of taste. Nazi representations of women, as in Ivo Saliger's *Diana's Rest*, portray women as reproductive bodies having little variation among them (color pl. 2). They may be healthy, but they are emotionally empty. When faced by less kitschy representations of the body, the Nazis were repulsed, and they launched their own version of a culture war: their campaign against modern art stemmed from the inability to tolerate any human forms except the most familiar, monochromatic, and regular. Specifically, the Nazis rejected the modern in art as degenerate and ugly because they viewed it as representing physical and mental disability. Hitler saw in paintings by Modigliani, Klee, and Chagall images of "misshapen cripples," "cretins," and racial inferiors (figs. 3 and 4) when the rest of the world saw masterpieces of modern art (cited by Mosse 29; see also Siebers 2000a). Hitler was wrong, of course—not about the place of disability in modern aesthetics but about its beauty. Modern art continues to move us because of its refusal of harmony, bodily integrity, and



Figure 1. Venus de Milo, 100 BCE, Paris, Louvre



Figure 2. Arno Breker,
Readiness, 1937,
Great German Art
Exhibition, 1937



Figure 3. “Degenerate” art by Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and Amedeo Modigliani, from Paul Schultze-Naumburg, *Kunst und Rasse*, 1928



Figure 4. Facial deformities, from Paul Schultze-Naumburg, *Kunst und Rasse*, 1928

perfect health. If modern art has been so successful, I argue, it is because of its embrace of disability as a distinct version of the beautiful.

What is the impact of damage on classic works of art from the past? It is true that we strive to preserve and repair them, but perhaps the accidents of history have the effect of renewing rather than destroying artworks. Vandalized works seem strangely modern. In 1977 a vandal attacked a Rembrandt self-portrait with sulfuric acid, transforming the masterpiece

forever and regrettably (see Dornberg 1987, 1988; Gamboni). Nevertheless, the problem is not that the resulting image no longer belongs in the history of art. Rather, the riddle of the vandalized work is that it now seems to have moved to a more recent stage in aesthetic history, giving a modernist rather than baroque impression (fig. 5). The art vandal puts the art object to use again, replicating the moment of its inception when it was being composed of raw material and before it became fixed in time and space as an aesthetic object. Would vandalized works become more emblematic of the aesthetic, if we did not restore them, as the Venus de Milo has not been restored?

My point is not to encourage vandalism but to use it to query the effect that disability has on aesthetic appreciation. Vandalism modernizes artworks, for better or worse, by inserting them in an aesthetic tradition increasingly preoccupied with disability. Only the historical unveiling of disability accounts for the aesthetic effect of vandalized works of art. Damaged art and broken beauty are no longer interpreted as ugly. Rather, they disclose new forms of beauty that leave behind a kitschy dependence on perfect bodily forms. They also suggest that experimentation with aesthetic form reflects a desire to experiment with human form. Beholders discover in vandalized works an image of disability that asks to be contemplated not as a symbol of human imperfection but as an experience of the corporeal variation found everywhere in modern life. Art is materialist because it relies on the means of production and the availability of material resources—as Marx understood. But art is also materialist in its obsession with the embodiment of new conceptions of the human. At a certain level, objects of art are bodies, and aesthetics is the science of discerning how some bodies make other bodies feel. Art is the active site designed to explore and expand the spectrum of humanity that we will accept among us.

Since human feeling is central to aesthetic history, it is to be expected that disability will crop up everywhere because the disabled body and mind always elicit powerful emotions. I am making a stronger claim: that disability is integral to modern aesthetics and that the influence of disability on art has grown, not dwindled, over the course of time. If this is the case, we may expect disability to exert even greater power over art in the future. We need to consider, then, how art is changed when we conceive of disability as an aesthetic value in itself. In particular, it is worth asking



Figure 5. Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait*, damaged by acid in 1977

how the presence of disability requires us to revise traditional conceptions of aesthetic production and appreciation, and here the examples of two remarkable artists, Paul McCarthy and Judith Scott, make a good beginning because they are especially illuminating and suggestive.

Paul McCarthy is well known in avant-garde circles for his chaotic,

almost feral, bodily performances as well as his tendency to make art from food and condiments. One of the most significant fictions of disembodiment in the history of art is, of course, the doctrine of disinterestedness, which defines the power of an artwork in direct proportion to the urgency of the desires and appetites overcome in the beholder. Hunger, sexual desire, and greed have no place in the appreciation of artworks, despite the fact that these appetites are constant themes in art. McCarthy challenges the classic doctrine of disinterestedness in aesthetic appreciation by revealing that it censors not only the body but also the disabled body. He refuses to prettify the human body, reproducing the logic of the nineteenth-century freak show in the museum space with exhibits that stress bodily deformation. He also makes art out of foodstuff, forcing beholders to experience his work with all their senses, not merely with their eyes. In short, his is a different embodiment of art, one expert in the presentation of differently abled bodies. For example, *Hollywood Halloween* (figs. 6 and 7) pictures the artist tearing a Halloween mask from his head, but because the mask has been stuffed with hamburger meat and ketchup in addition to the artist's head, the effect is a kind of self-defacement. The transformation of the artist from eerie able-bodiedness to the defacement of disability is the work's essential movement. The work reverses the apparently natural tendency to consider any form of corporeal transformation as driven by the desire for improvement or cure. In *Death Ship* (color pl. 3), a crazed ship captain hands out sailor hats to the audience, inviting them on a voyage in which the boundaries between body, food, and filth dissolve, as the captain smears his body with ketchup and food and installs a feeding tube for himself running from his anus to his mouth. *Mother Pig* (color pl. 4) similarly plays out a self-sculpture using processed meats and condiments in which McCarthy, masked as a pig, wraps strings of frankfurters smeared with ketchup around his penis. In these typical works, the smell of raw meat and pungent condiments permeate the air of the performance space, making it difficult for the audience to avoid reactions to foodstuff and flesh from its everyday life.

In addition to the challenge to disinterestedness perpetrated on the audience by McCarthy's stimulation of the appetite or gag reflex, as well as the assault on human beauty and form, is the representation of the mental condition of the artist. As the performances grow more intense and irrational, the audience begins to react to McCarthy as if he were mentally

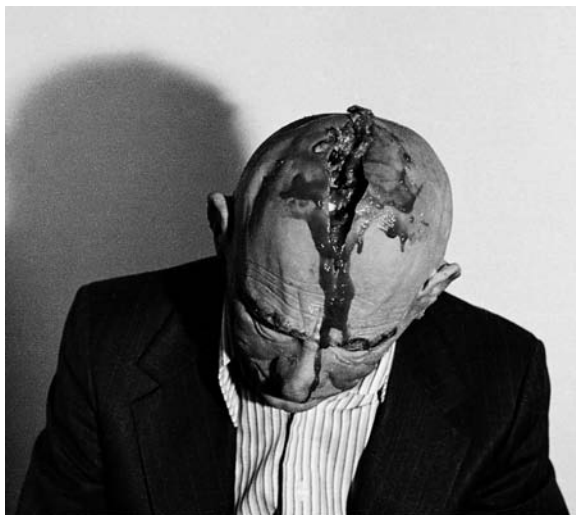


Figure 6. Paul McCarthy, *Hollywood Halloween*, 1977, performance



Figure 7. Paul McCarthy, *Hollywood Halloween*, 1977, performance

disabled. The video of *Class Fool* (1976), for example, shows the audience's reaction to his performance, moving from amusement, to hesitation, to aversion. At some level, McCarthy's commitment to elemental behavior—smearing himself with food, repeating meaningless actions until they are ritualized, fondling himself in public—asks to be seen as idiocy, as if the core values of intelligence and genius were being systematically removed from the aesthetic in preference to stupidity and cognitive disorder. *Plaster*



Figure 8. Paul McCarthy, *Plaster Your Head and One Arm into a Wall*, 1973, performance

Your Head and One Arm into a Wall (fig. 8), in which McCarthy inserts his head and left arm into wall cavities and then uses his right hand to close the holes with plaster, provides a more obvious example of these values. McCarthy changes how art is appreciated by overstimulating his audience with a different conception of art's corporeality. He takes the analogy between artwork and body to its limit, challenging ideas about how the human should be transformed and imagined. Moreover, the link between aesthetic appreciation and taste faces a redoubtable attack in his works because of their single-minded evocation of things that disgust.

The appreciation of the work of art is a topic well rehearsed in the history of aesthetics, but rarely is it considered from the vantage point of the disabled mind—no doubt because the spectacle of the mentally disabled person, rising with emotion before the shining work of art, disrupts the long-standing belief that pronouncements of taste depend on a form of human intelligence as autonomous and imaginative as the art object itself. Artistic production also seems to reflect a limited and well-defined range of mental actions. Traditionally, we understand that art originates in genius, but genius is really at a minimum only the name for an intelligence large enough to plan and execute works of art—an intelligence that usually goes by the name of “intention.” Defective or impaired intelligence cannot make art according to this rule. Mental disability represents an absolute rupture with the work of art. It marks the constitutive moment of abolition, according to Michel Foucault, that dissolves the essence of what art is (286).

The work of Judith Scott challenges the absolute rupture between mental disability and the work of art and applies more critical pressure on intention as a standard for identifying artists. It is an extremely rare case, but it raises complex questions about aesthetics of great value to people with disabilities. A remarkably gifted fiber artist emerged in the late 1980s in California named Judith Scott. Her work is breathtaking in its originality and possesses disturbing power as sculptural form (color pl. 5). The sculptures invite comparisons with major artists of the twentieth century and allude to a striking variety of mundane and historical forms, from maps to the works of Alberto Giacometti, from Etruscan art and classical sculpture in its fragmentary state, to children's toys (color pl. 6). What makes the fiber sculptures even more staggering as works of art is the fact that Scott has no conception of the associations sparked by her



Figure 9. Judith Scott in action, no date, Creative Growth Center

objects and no knowledge of the history of art. In fact, she never visited a museum or read an art book, she did not know she was an “artist,” and never intended to make “art” when she set to work, at least not in the conventional understanding of these words. This is because Scott had Down syndrome (fig. 9). She was also deaf, unable to speak, extremely uncommunicative, isolated. She was warehoused at age seven in the Ohio Asylum for the Education of Idiotic and Imbecilic Youth and spent the next thirty-five years of her life as a ward of the state, until her twin sister rescued her and enrolled her in the Creative Growth Center, a California program in Oakland designed to involve intellectually disabled people with the visual arts. Almost immediately, she began to make fiber sculptures six hours a day, and she maintained this relentless pace for over ten years.

Although materials were made available to her, Scott behaved as if

she were pilfering them, and each one of her sculptures takes the form of a cocoon at the center of which is secreted some acquired object (color pl. 7). The first hidden objects were sticks and cardboard spools used to store yarn and thread. Then she began to wrap other objects, an electric fan, for instance. Commentators have made the habit of associating her methods with acts of theft and a kind of criminal sensibility, acquired during thirty-five years in a mental institution. The association between Scott's aesthetic method and criminal sensibility, however, takes it for granted that she was unable to distinguish between the Ohio Asylum for the Education of Idiotic and Imbecilic Youth and the Creative Growth Center in Oakland, between thirty-five years spent in inactivity and neglect and her years involved intensively in the making of objects of beauty. The fact is that Scott's relation to her primary materials mimics modern art's dependence on found art—a dependence that has never been described as a criminal sensibility, to my knowledge. Her method demonstrates the freedom both to make art from what she wants and to change the meaning of objects by inserting them into different contexts. One incident in particular illuminates her attitude toward her primary materials. During a period of construction in the art center, Scott was left unobserved one day for longer than usual. She emptied every paper-towel dispenser in the building and fabricated a beautiful monochromatic sculpture made entirely of knotted white paper towels (fig. 10).

Scott's method always combines binding, knotting, sewing, and weaving different fiber materials around a solid core whose visibility is entirely occluded by the finished work of art. She builds the works patiently and carefully, as if in a process of concealment and discovery that destroys one object and gives birth to another mysterious thing (fig. 11). A number of aesthetic principles are clearly at work in her method, even though she never articulated them. She strives to ensure the solidity and stability of each piece, and individual parts are bound tightly to a central core. Since she had no view to exhibit her work, no audience in mind, her sculptures do not distinguish between front and back. Consequently, her work projects a sense of independence and autonomy almost unparalleled in the sculptural medium (color pl. 8). Despite the variety of their shape, construction, and parts, then, Scott's sculptures consolidate all of their elements to give the impression of a single, unique body.

John MacGregor, who has done the most extensive study to date on



Figure 10. Judith Scott, untitled, no date, Creative Growth Center



Figure 11. Judith Scott in action, no date, Creative Growth Center

Scott, poses succinctly the obvious critical questions raised by her work. “Does serious mental retardation,” he asks, “invariably preclude the creation of true works of art? . . . Can art, in the fullest sense of the word, emerge when intellectual development is massively impaired from birth, and when normal intellectual and emotional maturation has failed to be attained?” (3). The problem, of course, is that Scott did not possess the intelligence associated with true artists by the tradition of art history. What kind of changes in the conception of art would be necessary to include her in this history?

Despite the many attacks launched by modern artists, genius remains the unspecified platform on which almost every judgment in art criticism is based, whether about artistic technique, invention, or subversiveness. In fact, Thomas Crow claims that the campaign against autonomy and creativity in modern art gives rise to a cult of the genius more robust than any conceived during the Romantic period. The growth, rather than decline, of heroic biography supporting the value of art is a constant theme in his work (1996a). We still assume that creativity is an expression of inspiration and autonomy, just as we assume that aesthetic technique is a form of brilliance always at the artist’s disposal. Intelligence, however, is fraught with difficulties as a measure of aesthetic quality, and intention in particular has long been condemned as an obsolete tool for interpreting works of art.² Artists do not control—nor should they—the meaning of their works, and intentions are doubtful as a standard of interpretation because they are variable, often forgotten, improperly executed, inscrutable to other people, and marred by accidents in aesthetic production. If intention has uncertain value for interpretation, why should it be used to determine whether an action or object is a work of art?

Disability aesthetics prizes physical and mental difference as a significant value in itself. It does not embrace an aesthetic taste that defines harmony, bodily integrity, and health as standards of beauty. Nor does it support the aversion to disability required by traditional conceptions of human or social perfection. Rather, it drives forward the appreciation of disability found throughout modern art by raising an objection to aesthetic standards and tastes that exclude people with disabilities. Modern art comes over time to be identified with disability, and to the point where the appearance of the disabled or wounded body signals the presence of the aesthetic itself. No object beyond the figure of disability has a greater

capacity to be accepted at the present moment as an aesthetic representation. Disability is not, therefore, one subject of art among others. It is not merely a theme. It is not only a personal or autobiographical response embedded in an artwork. It is not solely a political act. It is all of these things, but it is more. It is more because disability is properly speaking an aesthetic value, which is to say, it participates in a system of knowledge that provides materials for and increases critical consciousness about the way that some bodies make other bodies feel. The idea of disability aesthetics affirms that disability operates both as a critical framework for questioning aesthetic presuppositions in the history of art and as a value in its own right important to future conceptions of what art is. It is only right, then, that we refer, when we acknowledge the role played by disability in modern art, to the idea of disability aesthetics.