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Shadow Play: Re-Constructing the Human/Body through Disability Art

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Abstract

Art serves as a critical force for interruption, particularly when it comes to the neoliberal and ideological classifications of ‘human’ and ‘body.’ After providing theoretical and historical groundwork for these categories, this paper turns toward visual art in order to propose that our understandings of ourselves and one another are incomplete. I follow the works of disability artists Katie Dallam, Laura Ferguson, and Sunaura Taylor in order to analyze moments of transgression and interruption within their paintings. This allows for an exploration into the interdependency that is raised by scholars Susan Crutchfield and Marcy Epstein as they inquire “how to break through the mutually crippling hierarchy, how to convey that we are each other’s shadows, one flesh.” I propose that disability artwork offers a moment of critical and necessary interruption to the Western discourse, displacing and de-stabilizing the assumptions of what constitutes a ‘human’ and a ‘body,’ proposing instead a multiplicity and fluidity of meaning.

Keywords: Disability Studies, Disability Art, Feminist Theory, Body, Human

The Western grammatical and ideological categories of ‘body’ and ‘human’ are tools that have been weaponized to create exclusions in our collective imaginations, material environments, and relationships. While this erasure and separation has its roots in the colonial gender system (the reduction of subjectivity/intersubjectivity along colonial classifications of power-, race-, and gender-exclusion), it has also occurred along the faultlines of ability/disability. For example, what images come to mind upon hearing the word body? More often than not, the body is imagined to have ten fingers, ten toes, two eyes, two ears, two legs, and so forth—not to mention the expectations of function placed upon each corresponding part. This narrow imagining depends upon an ableist framework that rejects ‘bodies’ which are capitalistically and economically unpredictable. In other words, the culturally-imagined ‘body’ is held in place by Eurocentric standards of “reason” and “productivity.”

The grammatical and imagined ‘human’ has also been used to reinforce oppression and exclusion. In similar manner, it is helpful to ask the question, who counts as ‘human’? Histories of gendered and racial violence make it clear that not all bodies and not all people have been able to belong to the class of human. Visual art offers a much-needed respite from the limitations and violence of dominating Western definitions, presenting new ideas through which we can imagine being in a body and being human. In particular, disability art—art made by artists with disabilities—interrupts the Eurocentric, colonial discourse that overrides one’s ability to imagine the human body. At the same time, this art creates an alternative space in which to find new methods of re-constructing embodiment while exposing the current exclusionary tactics of the hegemonic order.

In *Points of Contact*, a book that catalogues disability art and culture, Susan Crutchfield and Marcy Epstein

examine the way in which society assigns roles to individuals, particularly those with disabilities. Quoting the writings of Bell Gale Chevigny in their introduction, they ask, “how to break through the mutually crippling hierarchy, how to convey that we are each other’s shadows, one flesh” (Crutchfield and Epstein 7). In the context of today’s political tensions, the idea of being “each other’s shadows, one flesh” seems at once an illusory fantasy and an unattainable ideal (Crutchfield and Epstein 283). Yet this is exactly why Crutchfield and Epstein’s words are so vital—they both name the oppression of the hierarchical order and illuminate the fantasy that such a premise of unity might evoke. While untangling systems of oppression cannot simply occur by throwing paint on a canvas or putting forth a new aesthetic, the inquiry highlights the importance of recognizing our interdependence alongside faultlines of difference. In order to understand that “we are each other’s shadows, one flesh,” the categories of ‘body’ and ‘human’ must be interrupted and re-assembled. Or, to say it another way, the “corporeal presence and absence” of bodies with disabilities must be addressed (Casper and Moore 4). As these reflections will demonstrate, art is a critical component of reassembling and reclaiming our imaginations, providing counter-narratives to (and exposing) the violent, dominant, colonial discourse (Crutchfield and Epstein 283).

While our connections to ourselves and one another change, these connections are also an echo of our lived history, tracing the lines between body and experience. In other words, our bodies are time capsules of interaction, storing shadows of experience both conscious and unconscious. Art also traces these lines, depicting figures, landscapes, abstract expressions, and images that evoke both the familiar and unfamiliar. In particular, art that reflects disability confronts its viewers with an echo of body and voice that exposes the failure of an imagination supported by a drive towards “normalcy.”

Before turning to the visual, it is necessary to explore how ‘body’ and ‘human’ have previously functioned, and how these terms have become the grounds of omission, exclusion, and violence. From this grounding, we can then shift towards discerning the emergent questions that need to be asked of each category (although the categories of ‘human’ and ‘body’ are not necessarily mutually exclusive). The arising questions then serve as a moment of interruption, de-stabilizing the symbol of the human body.

Luciano and Chen’s essay “Has the Queer Ever Been Human” recognizes the link between what is considered ‘body’ and what is considered ‘human.’ By following Laura Aguilar’s photographs, they are able to highlight how “conjectures one might make” concerning the photo “depend on assumptions about what a ‘proper body’ looks like and what it can do” (Luciano and Chen 182). Pulling from the philosophy of fat studies and queer studies, these authors show how Aguilar’s body sits as a site of transgression and disruption, resisting Western notions of ‘body’ and ‘human.’



Figure 1: Laura Aguilar

In the photograph above (Figure 1), Aguilar’s body is facing away from the camera. It is difficult to distinguish the boundary between her body and the body of the rocks. Aguilar’s legs, arms, and face are not visible to the viewer—in fact, her form mimics that of the rock, rounded and arced. Yet the invisibility of her full body does not remove the assumption that her body possesses limbs and that these limbs look and function in a particular way. There is an unspoken assumption that Aguilar possesses what the Western world has deemed a “proper body.” But why do such assumptions exist? Do not all bodies vary in their capacities, abilities, and movements? The assumptions made about Laura Aguilar’s body in the photograph, and bodies in general, are interlaced with assumptions of what is acceptable

and desirable. What bodies are noticed, seen, or celebrated? How do Western, capitalist notions of ‘body’ change based on gender, race, age, or sexuality? These questions are necessary if the current narrow and violent imagining of ‘body’ and ‘human’ are to be challenged and re-imagined. However, because being ‘human’ happens in a body, exclusion from one category is often connected to exclusion from the other.

In her book *Dangerous Crossings*, Claire Jean Kim argues for the reconstruction of the category “human.” She points out that “the human has always been a thoroughly exclusionary concept in race and species terms—that it has only ever made sense as a way of marking who does *not* belong in the inner circle” (Kim 287). However, race and species are not the only ways in which exclusion has occurred; ‘human’ has also been used to mark varying abilities and bodies. In order to be considered human, one must look, act, talk, and move through the world in a certain way. To violate this code is to become vulnerable to violence. For example, it is considered rude to eat with one’s hands, or to be in any way unable to control one’s body. Tremors and flailings, seizures and emotional outbursts—these are generally not accepted and place one on the outskirts of the ‘human’ construction, where they are socially isolated and refused services. The assumption that each individual can *and should* be able to control their body, especially in public spaces, is a social requirement. To deviate from the “proper body” is to be placed outside of the ‘human’ group: the two categories are linked.

Throughout *Points of Contact*, Crutchfield discusses different disabilities, examining the link between human and body. She interlaces her research with the work and perspectives of various artists with disabilities. This allows her to access a perspective outside the hegemonic framework. As she expresses in the introduction, “we seek the experience of both disability and art as it involves daily living, production, creativity, and dedication—death, obstacle, destruction and abuse. It is the familiar story of artists as they explore the unfamiliar. It is the familiar story of disability as it makes the familiar less so” (Crutchfield 18). Crutchfield notes that disability is a re-writing and re-imagining of the human story, the process of creativity highlighting a body’s movement through the unfamiliar and making the familiar less so. In order to de-stabilize and expose the ableist notions of ‘body’ that the ‘human’ category continues to make, there must be new ways of envisioning and un-

derstanding bodies, a re-writing of the human concept that invites a different way of relating to one’s self and one another. (Crutchfield 283).

How then does disability art dismantle the categories of ‘body’ and ‘human’? What does disability culture have to say through its visual art to Western constructions and to those within its community? Do the artists create a space wherein their work can trace new lines, echoing narratives and ways of being that have been made absent or silent? These vibrant shadows evoke both the familiar and unfamiliar, creating new ground upon which bodies can relate to one another as subjects, opening themselves to see each other.

Not all visual art conveys the same weight of disruption, but in the book, *Humans Being: Disability in Contemporary Art*, each piece of art unsettles and exposes cultural narratives that write the grammar of ‘body’ and ‘human.’ The art helps to interrupt the concept of embodiment; Katie Dallam, Laura Ferguson, and Sunaura Taylor in particular offer important commentary through their individual pieces, which were on display at the Chicago Cultural Center in 2006.

Susan Burch records that “artists have used representations of disability in ways that have contradicted the lived experience, feelings, and concerns of disabled people themselves. Primarily, artists have used disability to symbolize the grotesque and evil, or paradoxically, the inspirational and innocent. These representations have generally failed to capture the complexity of life lived with disability” and thus have failed to capture the complexity of what it means to be human or to inhabit a body (“Disability Art and Artistic Expression” 264). Because of the construed characterizations of disability in the artistic domain, it is critical that these colonial imaginations of disability as grotesque and evil, inspirational or innocent, be exposed, challenged, and deconstructed. This means reworking assumptions about bodies and their capabilities, as well as reimagining the category of human by making new spaces, representations, and narratives. Visual art makes such spaces and reimaginings possible, as many of the artists from the Chicago Cultural Exhibit demonstrate.

Katie Dallam’s artwork, for example, does just this. In her black and red painting *Rage* (Figure 2), she confronts her viewers with their own Madness in the vulnerability of her honest presence. The harshness of the colors creates a stark contrast that pulls the viewer into the work, making it inescapable.



Figure 2: "Rage" by Katie Dallam

The piece is not smooth; the harsh lines and visible brushstrokes create energy and movement. There are stark, sharp teeth and skulls threaded into the painting, giving it a vulnerable sensation. The black paint echoes the shape of a body, yet the figure in the painting also appears monstrous. Its large hands, twisted shape, and hunched frame resist the “proper body” that Aguilar, in her photographs, also resists.

In regard to her artwork, Dallam says that “painting became my voice. It allowed me to reconnect with the world and to communicate what I see and what I feel” (*Humans Being: Disability in Contemporary Art* 18). Dallam discusses how she felt fearful to show her paintings to anyone, worried that people might find them too disturbing. She discusses her process of trying to hide her disability, only to recognize that through painting, her disability “raises its voice and says ‘Here I am! Now deal with me’” (*Humans Being: Disability in Contemporary Art* 18-19). The confrontational nature of *Rage* is full of texture and movement. It is a deep emotional encounter, both with Dallam’s disability and her experience. The figures in the painting are loose constructions of bodies, faces and mouths augmented. The “monster” figures cross the boundaries between bodies, their skeletal features echoing fingers and shapes, yet taking up a space that is separate and all their own. In this style, Dallam blurs the lines between human and monster, between a human body and something Other. What might the hunched “monster” figure be asking of its viewers? What does *Rage* demonstrate in regards to Madness, bodies, and the human? It is interesting to note how the creature in Dallam’s work seems to embody an emotion: rage. It is typical for bodies and humans to receive affirmation regarding what they can do, but the figure in Dallam’s painting does not do any particular thing. Rather, this figure is its emotion, filling itself and the canvas with harsh color and wild fury. Such a fullness of rage is often condemned as unacceptable, especially in public; yet the figure of Dallam’s painting holds the weight of its rage. It refuses to control itself. Dallam’s artistic act creates space for re-imagining the human body, her own disability calling out the existence and presence of her experience, even as society so furiously tries to erase it, silence it, and force its shadows to disappear.

The piece *Standing Couple with Visible Skeleton* (Figure 3) engages a similar counternarrative. Laura Ferguson, a prominent artist with scoliosis,



Figure 3: *Standing Couple with Visible Skeleton* by Laura Ferguson

talks about how her curved spine has caused her a heightened awareness of her bodily processes (*Humans Being: Disability in Contemporary Art* 30-31). Her art depicts an anatomically accurate imaging of her spine, which she describes as a vital process in gaining a sense of ownership and belonging within herself. Ferguson notes that “to fashion a new relationship to one’s body and of one’s body to the world” takes “a redesigning of the self, a desire to accept one’s own different body and still feel beautiful” (*Humans Being: Disability in Contemporary Art* 30). She writes that “making art can help this to happen—a transformational strategy: the making of something whole or beautiful enables us to feel wholeness and beauty in ourselves” (*Humans Being: Disability in Contemporary Art* 30). I would add that the wholeness and beauty art invites does not begin or end with self, but extends beyond. In other words, disability does not make “vulnerable victims,” but is crucial to what Riva Lehrer calls being “fully human,” (*Humans Being: Disability in Contemporary Art* 6). What, though, does that

concept of “fully human” even mean? Perhaps Lehrer is speaking to the experiences of embodiment that are suppressed and disavowed, but always already on the surface. The art in *Humans Being* does not redistribute a space for disability within current colonial imaginations, but rather disrupts that narrative by declaring its existence and refusing to follow normalized techniques.

To circle back to Ferguson’s painting: two bodies hold one another. Because of the perspective Ferguson takes, the gender of the individual holding Ferguson’s body remains indecipherable, opening the heteronormative narrative and placing the bodies in a queer and undetermined relationship of flux. The central focus of Ferguson’s piece is the curved compression of spinous processes that are seen through the x-ray of skin that her art provides, a visual encounter that invites its audience to see beyond the first layer, beyond the ableist assumptions of body. Ferguson’s artwork portrays a counter narrative of embodiment, creating a sense of wholeness and contentment even as society promotes the need for “fixing” and conformity. Through the portrayal of her body in such an anatomically accurate and visually soft manner, Ferguson is able to disrupt exclusionary categories and expose new narratives of embodiment not just for herself, but for anyone who encounters her art.

Sunaura Taylor theorizes and paints along these patterns of disruption. Not only does she aspire to deconstruct the boundaries between abled bodies and disabled bodies, but she also works in the spaces between the questions of what is human and what is animal. In her 2003 work *Jolly Jumper* (Figure 4) Taylor talks about the assumption that all disabled people are disabled in the same way. She mentions a recent piece she painted for a friend, and how she came to the realization that she desires her art to protest the stigma that “all disabled people look alike” (*Humans Being: Disability in Contemporary Art* 64). Because of her arthrogryposis, which is the fixation of one’s joints in an extended and flexed position, Taylor does everything with her mouth. “I cook, clean, kiss, sing, carry, and paint through my teeth, jaw, tongue, and lips,” she says (*Humans Being: Disability in Contemporary Art* 64). Taylor’s creativity in producing her works, finding ways in which to use her body to move through the world uniquely, highlights the artistic assumptions concerning what it means to create: the standard ideas of painting with brushes, using only hands to do so, etc. By creating in her own way, Taylor’s works unhinge the assumptions of the human body and invite audiences to re-imagine the process of making visual art.



Figure 4: *Jolly Jumper* by Sunaura Taylor, 2003



Figure 5: *Self Portrait with Wings* by Sunaura Taylor, 2003

For instance, in her oil painting *Self Portrait with Wings*, Taylor depicts her child-self lying on the ground, gazing curiously at the viewer in direct confrontation. Colorful, whimsical wings place most of her body out of view, giving the audience a sense of mystery when defining Taylor's body. Perhaps Taylor is critiquing the assumptions made of bodies, offering the audience a different shadow through which to experience and encounter bodies. Perhaps Taylor is invoking imagination to reconstruct the notion of "human"—what do we do with a human that has wings? How might this imaginative addition expand our imagination and our own relationship to our bodies?

Each of the aforementioned artists, from Dallam to Taylor, rupture colonial assumptions surrounding disability, bodies, and what is meant by the classification of 'human.' As the artists compile their works, their bodies come into conversation with one another, echoing ideas, deconstructions, and articulations that then

interact with the viewer's assumptions. As their pieces re-conceptualize and interrupt the way being in a body is imagined, the work of "acting together" becomes more palpable, and hierarchies of oppression bend. Each of the artists enhance the journey into this alternative space where shadows cross and exchange. They further new narratives that allow for different embodiments and a multiplicity of meanings. The interruption created by disability art reminds viewers that our understandings of ourselves and one another are incomplete, and that 'human' and 'body' are always already beyond what we have been taught to assume, value, or see.

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