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From Identity Politics to Dismodernism?: Changes in the Social Meaning of Disability Art

ABSTRACT

Art has gained an important position in the identity politics of the disability movement. The article sheds light on how disabled artists enact their positions as disabled and as artists. In a qualitative survey, a total of 30 artists affiliated with the disability arts movement in the United Kingdom and United States were interviewed. Most believe that disability art has developed in two phases. The first phase is closely related to the emerging disability rights movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The idea of the present situation as a second phase of disability art is characterized by artists wanting to perform and to exhibit for a mainstream audience, and by a combination of disability issues and non-disability issues. These changes in the social field of disability art seem to be structured by the disputed identity politics of the disability movement.

Keywords: art, identity, culture, disability

De la politique identitaire à un nouveau modernisme? Les changements de la signification sociale de l'Art et Handicap

ABSTRACT

L'art a pris une place prépondérante dans la politique identitaire du mouvement de défense des personnes handicapées. L'article éclaire la manière dont les artistes atteints de déficience(s) se positionnent en tant que personnes handicapées et en tant qu'artistes en même temps. Dans le cadre d'une étude qualitative, trente artistes affiliés au mouvement Art et Handicap ont ainsi été interviewés au Royaume-Uni et aux États-Unis. Pour la plupart d'entre eux, le développement du mouvement Art et Handicap s'est produit en deux étapes. La première est étroitement liée au mouvement émergent des droits des personnes handicapées vers la fin des années 1970, début des années 1980. La perception de la situation actuelle comme seconde étape de Art et Handicap est caractérisée par le souhait des artistes de réaliser leurs œuvres et de les présenter au grand public, et par le fait d'associer les questions liées au handicap à celles non liées à cette thématique. Ces changements dans le champ social de Art et Handicap semblent être structurés par les défis que posent la politique identitaire du mouvement de défense des personnes handicapées.

Mots clés : art, identité, culture, handicap

1. Introduction

In his seminal article on the sociology of art, Milton C. Albrecht (1968) pointed to the role of art in group solidarity and identity:

> Directly and indirectly, art may bolster the morale of groups and help create a sense of unity, of social solidarity; as used by dissident groups, it may create awareness of social issues and provide rallying cries for action and for social change. (p. 390)

The creation of "unity" in "dissident groups," in Albrecht's wording, today is often subsumed under the heading of identity politics. Key social markers employed in defining identity groups are ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender and disability (Kymlicka, 1998). Art has played an important role in the development of identification in all these groups. Examples are black art, queer art and feminist art as integral to the related diasporas and social movements (Powell, 2002; Butler, 2007). This relation between minority art form and social movement is also suggested to be the case with disability art (Davis, 2006). But what is disability art?

A core definition widely agreed upon is that disability art is art informed by the disability experience and created by disabled people. It has emerged out of disabled people's social movements in the United States and United Kingdom in the early 1980s, when cultural expressions became a part of an ongoing activity to gain unity and pride among disabled people. As an art form, disability art is institutionalized by organizations releasing periodicals, organizing festivals, and in recent years, managing web sites. A number of widely recognized professional artists are disabled, and are active in institutionalizing disability art (Sandahl, 2003; Masefield, 2006). In the disability community, disability art is perceived as a powerful means of expressing a positive identity as disabled. Oppression and discrimination are combated through identification with positive values and with the struggle for equality. Today, a main challenge for those involved seems to be to somehow take disability art out of the ghetto and into the mainstream, but on its own terms (Hambrook, 2009).

The British sociologist Stuart Hall discusses identity as the use of history, language and culture in the process of defining who we are, and concludes by defining identity as "points of temporary attachment to the subject's positions which discursive practices construct for us" (Hall, 1996, p. 6). These processes of identity construction are far from conflict free and have led another sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman, to conclude about identity that "Whenever you hear that word, you can be sure there is a battle going on" (2004, p. 77). A strong criticism of identity politics in disability worlds has been raised by the British sociologist Tom Shakespeare. He talks about the "prison of identity politics which leads to the politics of victimhood and celebration of failure" (2006, p. 82). He believes the goal of disability politics should be to make disability as irrelevant as possible and to avoid ethnic conceptions of disability identity. A different position is voiced by the US scholar Lennard Davis (2003). He argues that disability is the beginning of a new ethics of the body. Disability is at the core of biotechnology debates; an ever-expanding number of conditions are included in the disability category and the aging population imply more disability per capita than ever.

Following postmodernism, Davis identifies an era of dismodernism where disability, that is, the idea that we are all non-standard, becomes a general lens for understanding the world. Important to keep in mind is that the two positions are not necessarily antagonistic regarding the social practices of disabled people. It is possible to value disabled body experience (as Davis does) while rejecting the tedious reference to disabled identity (as Shakespeare does).

In this article, I analyze how artists affiliated with disability art enact their positions as disabled and as artists in the social climate of challenged identity politics. Do they see their art production as a contribution to disability awareness, or as an autonomous aesthetic practice? To shed light on these questions it is important to base the analysis on a definition of art as a collective process taking place in art worlds and involving a wide array of social actors. Artworks emerge in a social web that includes the artist, often recognized as the mastermind, as well as support personnel, curators, specialized audiences and the audience at large. How artwork is given meaning and value takes place in the social field constituted by these actors and the traditions they represent (Becker, 2008). The discussion in the article focuses on artists, but the web of actors is a key reference both in the interview guide and in the process of analysis.

Disability art distinctively differs from other categories that frame the relation between disability and art. The most widely recognized categories are art therapy, outsider art, and disability aesthetics. Art therapy is framed by the health sciences. Its therapeutic ambitions are two-fold: to bring out suppressed feelings based on psychotherapeutic theories and to provide disabled people with a valued social practice based on social work theory (Heenan, 2006). Outsider art is framed by collectors, and is made by people outside the art institution. The art is valued for its authenticity and for not being corrupted by the shifting fashions of high art. The most well-known artists and collectors have historically been closely related to the institutions of psychiatry, but this relationship has changed in the last two decades with the emergence of independent collectors and gallery owners specializing in what they describe as intuitive, visionary, and marginal art (Rhodes, 2000). The concept of disability aesthetics is developed from the position of the art historian and the curator. It is a framework both for reconsidering the history of art and for giving value to disability in the aesthetic qualities assigned to works of art (Siebers, 2010). As I shall try do demonstrate, disability-art-affiliated artists to some degree welcome disability aesthetics, but distance themselves from art therapy and outsider art.

2. Method

I interviewed 30 people identified as related to disability art, either by themselves or by disability culture activists, curators and other artists. The interviews occurred in two intensive fieldwork projects, one in Berkeley, California and the other in Oxford, England. They were conducted in the Spring terms of 2005 and 2006, respectively. Based in Oxford, I travelled in Southern England, Wales, and The Midlands to meet with artists. In the United States, I met with artists based in New York and Chicago, in addition to those based in The Bay Area I met on day trips from Berkeley.

In the United States and the United Kingdom, disability art has been defined and developed in close relation to disability activism. Therefore, these countries are key arenas for

the development of disability art. In addition to the author's interviews, material in the Internet-accessible Artists with Disabilities Oral History Project at the Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley, has been consulted.

Interviewees were selected based on the sociological understanding of art as a process involving other people in addition to the artists. The artists and disability art organizers I interviewed were initially suggested to me by a few helpful artists with extensive knowledge about the scenes in the United States and the United Kingdom. These gatekeepers' definition of what disability art was became important in the selection process. But it was not sufficient. In addition, I contacted people I read about or who were referred to by those I met. In selecting contacts, I sought people with broad experience in the scene who represented a wide variety of art forms and held different views on the role of disability art. Art forms where the human body is on display, such as theatre, dance, and performance art, were the dominant art forms, but I also met with painters, writers, and a singer-songwriter.

The interviews were structured using an interview guide with a set of questions and citations. In preparing, I read extensively about disability art, and picked a set of citations representing what I considered as important issues in disability art. One example is a statement from Alan Sutherland, a British disability arts activist and performer, cited from the website Disability Arts Online: "The primary audience of disability arts is other disabled people. We don't feel that our work has to be ratified by the approval of a mainstream, able-bodied audience." This and ten to fifteen other citations were used as prompts when I met with the individuals recognized in disability arts, and our dialogues were partly structured by the citations. The people I met found it exciting to develop comments on them. My citation strategy situates the research practice in the ongoing disability art discourse. Thereby, I positioned myself not as an expert collecting data, but rather as a sociologist and disability studies scholar keen to learn and discuss about disability art. I did not meet interviewees as disabled artists, but as artists somehow related to the category of disability art; hence, I use "disability-art-affiliated artists" as a term defining what the interviewees had in common.

The findings and some of the discussions are presented in two major parts. The first depicts how disability art is understood and the second depicts how this minority art category is challenged and developing. These two parts and their sub-categories have been developed in a process going back and forth between what was discussed in the interviews and perspectives from cultural disability studies and the network perspectives prominent in the sociology of art, highlighting art as a field constituted by a wide range of actors.

3. Art in Disability Identity Politics

3.1 Awareness of a formative phase of disability art in the 1980s
That disability art originated in political movements of the 1980s is important to several writers addressing disability art. They emphasize the intimate relation between disability art and disability politics, and exclude both artists with disabilities who do not identify themselves as disabled and art as therapy (Barnes, 2003). The collective experience of disability is in the forefront, and the artworks are valued for their ability to empower people with pride and solidarity (Swain, French, & Cameron, 2003).

In the formative phase of what came to be recognized as disability art, activists believed their minority art form to be about the disability experience and to be made for disabled people. The early work dealt mainly with disability issues directly.

> "We had to form a ghetto and to fight our way out of it. It was important to share work and ideas. Cabaret was the preferred art form, together with poetry, stand-up and polemic dramatizing short pieces" (disability arts activist).

Challenging the widespread conception of disability as primarily a bodily or mental defect causing a personal tragedy was important.

3.2 Disability Culture

A recent study on the use of humor among disabled stand-up comedians concludes that they provide an arena for identification and for understanding "aspects of a shared culture" (Reid, Stoughton, & Smith, 2006, p. 640). The idea of a disability culture focuses on cultural awareness and celebration based on the disability experience (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000). When artists talk about disability culture, they display a strong awareness of continuity.

> "There are a lot of commonalities among us even if some of us were not raised in a disability-culture family. We are different, have been asked inappropriate questions, and everyday activities take more time. We are unique, struggle with mortality, and we look humanity right in the eye" (film maker).

The artists generally share an ambivalent relation to the idea of a disability culture. No native homeland of disability exists, and the concept of a disability culture can appear somewhat strange; nevertheless, the artists feel that their shared experience is important.

The idea of a disability culture can be challenged as a problematic idea not only because of weak bonds concerning a common language and common experiences in the biological family, but also because very few who possibly can be included in the disability category in any way identify as disabled (Shakespeare, 2006). The artists interviewed are fully aware of this and respond in two ways. First, they point out that it is important for those who identify as disabled, and it represents a potential for those who do not, for example people impaired in adult years. Additionally, some artists with mild and not easily visible impairments were concerned about a coming out experience in adult years. They started to reflect on their biographies, and when they looked back on their youth, other disabled people in school came to their mind. This led to thoughts about what it would have been like to identify with other disabled pupils.

3.3 The historical legacy

History is important in identity politics. Referring to one's ancestors is central; examples include the suffragette movement for feminism and Oscar Wilde as a cultural icon for the gay movement. Dealing with these types of powerful images from history is a strategy involving strengthening of pride and feelings of self-worth.

Disability art has two sets of references to history: disabled artists and performers of the past, and disabled people represented in the cultural canons of western civilization. Both sets are debated, and opposing views are numerous. Among the disabled artists of the past, the most referred to are the so-called freaks performing in circuses and sideshows, and the painter Frida Kahlo. The freaks have been subject to frequent discussions by disability studies scholars beginning with Robert Bogdan's book *Freak Show* (1988). In it Bogdan reclaims them as professionals in the entertainment industry working in careers far better than the alternatives available during their times. This perception prevails among the artists interviewed.

> "History is about locating the roots. The freaks are strongly relevant. They had control of their appearance, they were economically independent, and they came together as a collective" (performance artist).

The freaks are celebrated among the artists as performing arts pioneers. The inspiring personal story and visual presence of the disabled body are also important in the way that painter Frida Kahlo (1907–1954) is made relevant.

> "When I first saw the work of Frida Kahlo, it was "wow." First time my whole story was told. Even if she was Mexican and we did not speak the same language, she gave me my story" (writer).

Also significant to disability art are representations of disabled people in important artworks of the past, especially in fictional literature and theatre. The interviewed artists interpret these representations in two ways. First, they see the characters as part of the history of oppression.

> "The disabled on the stage has been about signifying the evil. There is no history for disability art there, only as something to be rejected. It is only a visual shorthand for the evil and criminal. And contemporary theatre reinforces the stereotype" (performance artist).

Second, they put these figures to work in a process of empowerment.

> "I loved *Richard III* when I grew up. We are bloody powerful. Not the Tiny Tim of Dickens. I liked *Richard III* because it is a play about a strong person. I don't like the way we have been used, but we are there" (playwright).

The interviewee is ambivalent in her interpretation, but focuses on the images as empowering. The impaired characters from the canon of western theatre can be reclaimed both as an expression of an ongoing tradition that portrays impairment as evil and as an array of powerful characters to relate to in personal processes of empowerment.

3. 4 Fighting Discrimination

Discrimination and social oppression are central to analyzing disabled people's situation in the social model of disability (Barnes & Mercer, 2003). The artists affiliated with disability art face three forms of discrimination. First, disability is culturally de-valued.

> "From my own point of view, I have a lot of stories to tell about disability issues. But I have an expectation from the mainstream to start doing non-disability stuff. One guy told me that he "looked forward to my first film not about disability." He meant this as a compliment. But does he mean that he is waiting for my first grown-up film?" (film maker).

Second, discrimination in employment exists. For example, employers fear practical problems when hiring disabled people, such as limited access to galleries and theatres. Furthermore, in the film industry disabled characters tend to be played by able-bodied actors. US activists lobby a great deal in Hollywood on this issue.

Third, some people associate disability art with art as therapy. Consequently, artists striving for professionalism are often labeled as patients or as artists on a hobby level.

> "Professional critics will not come and review work by disability-art-identified artists. They believe it is amateur, community arts. Community arts has no status, it brings disability art into a therapeutic relation" (playwright).

When disability comes into art discourse, the prevailing societal dominance of the medical model of disability is revealed. Art therapy is framed by this model, whereby the artist is a patient and the instructor the therapist. Art therapy itself is not perceived as a problem, but for the artist struggling for recognition in the cultural field, being perceived as a patient seems like discrimination. A comparable stance is taken towards Outsider Art. It is perceived as having a strong element of therapy, and the possible quality of authenticity is not addressed. Concerning funding, a more ambivalent situation instigated by the medical model of disability exists.

> "Disabled people are on welfare benefits. This gives some possibilities, but at the same time it is part of discrimination in employment. I spent six years on my last film, and did not get paid" (filmmaker).

Welfare benefits can be perceived as a part of a discriminating social structure without positions for disabled people as productive workers. Simultaneously, the eligibility for welfare benefits can allow disabled artists to work full time on art production.

To understand how art is made, one must consider the artwork as an element in a social totality. The art's relation to politics, education, and economy must be examined (Inglis, 2005). Disability is intrinsically linked to the welfare system by an amalgam of pathology, medical examination and juridical rights to compensation and welfare benefits (Stone, 1985). Therefore, work and income constitute an ambivalent arena for disabled people. This ambivalence intersects with the peculiarities of art as a profession. Many

prospective artists exist, but very few positions are open. This scarcity creates an arena where art is either produced within professional careers, as a dedicated activity, but financed by so-called money jobs or as a hobby (Becker, 2008). Disabled people then find themselves in a doubly blurred nexus between welfare and art that creates possibilities. To put it briefly and bluntly, many disabled people living in western welfare societies do not need money jobs. The can survive on their welfare benefits. This situation has both good and bad sides. Accepting a disability allowance is a reversion to the status of a non-productive citizen, but simultaneously it is a situation comparable to guaranteed minimum income creating possibilities to engage in time-consuming art projects.

4. Towards the mainstream?

4.1 Awareness of a new historical epoch
Social movements engaged in identity politics may change, typically from a formative phase of disability art with narrow conceptions of identity and suppression to a more developed phase with a complex engagement in questions concerning identities, emphasizing the plural when underlining that there are many ways to identify as disabled (Davis, 2003). A discussion of the development of women's art by the sociologist Alexandra Hawson (2005) supports this view. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, she identifies a change from confrontational and explicit feminist artworks to artworks where aesthetics and deconstruction become increasingly important.

The interviewees divide the field of disability art into a formative historical phase of hard-core identity politics and a second phase of disability art with greater complexity in how artists relate to disability identity. Tension exists between the relation to the formative powers of disability awareness and the ambitions towards recognition in the mainstream.

> "The youth have another disability-art aesthetic. It is a different language from what we built up. Their work is more subtle. They have not had to struggle. This is different from my generation. We used shock tactics. They will maybe fit into the mainstream. They get education and degrees; they are with peers on a similar level to them. They have disability issues, but no disabled role models" (visual artist and disability arts organizer).

A danger exists that some of the power of disability identity can be lost in the eager positioning in a new situation. Nevertheless, it seems to be important that the nurturing of a disability identity does not implode into a nostalgic longing for yesterday, but that it remains a constructive force in structuring a position for disabled artists making art with a disability theme.

It is also interesting to note that the interviewee speaks with the language of a sociologist when referring to role models. This speaking style was a trend throughout the interviews. Almost all of the artists took part in networks where disability issues were discussed on a sophisticated theoretical level. They were aware of the changing conceptions of disability in the academic world of Disability Studies. Their awareness meant that being

younger than 40 did not determine that the artist had a complex engagement with art and disability and were striving towards the mainstream, and being older than 40 did not determine confrontational and overtly political artwork. How the artists were positioned on a continuum between narrow identity politics and striving for acclaim on the mainstream art scene was also related to how they understood disability and the purpose of art work.

4.2 How to make disability aesthetically interesting in art?
The artists interviewed explained their ambitions towards the mainstream in three ways. First, some corrected the contemporary culture's images that resonate poorly with disabled people's experiences. One example was a writer who stated that "there is a certain representation of disability in the mainstream culture that is important to fight against," and pointed out that writing memoirs among writers with disabilities has become an important movement in the United States along with the activist movements. Another example of correcting the images are Hollywood film industry lobby groups that seek to have disabled actors cast to play characters with a disability. Moreover, they seek to encourage non-disabled manuscript writers and actors to consult disabled people.

Second, some interviewees use shock tactics, a well-known strategy from disability art's formative phase. Now shock tactics are part of an idea to infuse contemporary culture with disability awareness, while still playing with the curious and novelty-seeking stare. This strategy is about conceiving the disabled body as powerful, about playing with dangerous labels such as *hunchback*, "to subvert the politics of the gaze", as one playwright put it. The third way departs most radically from the first wave of disability art. Here, the label "disability art" is blurred and the aesthetic possibilities come into the forefront. For example, a dance company leader points out that disabled dancers address movement differently, and she mentions as an example choreographer asking dancers to improvise on hearing words like "fall" and "stand".

> "Disabled dancers have special experiences that are important to what they do. They have a unique movement. The vocabulary of dance is broadened. It is like different dialects of the language" (choreographer).

But the disability must not disappear. Another dance artist pointed out a typical audience reaction: "We stopped seeing the wheelchairs." The dance company she represents does not want this to happen, however. The disability must be present. Therefore, company members take artificial legs off the dancers as part of a choreographical strategy to maintain the aesthetic importance of the disability.

In public, people with visual impairments are well accustomed to the novelty-seeking stare (Garland-Thomson, 2009). This familiarity makes disabled people well qualified for certain art forms.

> "Performance is in the forefront of disability art. This is different from other comparable art movements. A first reason is that we needed to laugh at our situation. This created the cabarets. The second reason is the public body. We are always available to the [gaze of the] medical profession, which makes it easy for us to take

our bodies on stage. We of course work in all media, but performance is in the forefront" (performance artist).

Disabled people are trained as performers in their sole designation as bodily different. They have presented their bodies to numerous medical examinations and their life history to numerous street-level bureaucrats and social workers (Kuppers, 2003).

In his concept of dismodernism, Davis (2003) points out that we are all dependent, that all subjects are incomplete without technology, and that taking care of the body is obligatory in both consumer and governmental health discourse. These social relations make the grounding of the dismodernist ethic; we are all non-standard. This heterogeneity among people calls for a more prominent position for disability in contemporary culture. One such involvement could be making disability aesthetically interesting to the art scene.

4.3 Managing the dual identification
Disabled artists enter the mainstream with the disability present, either in their life experience, or as the bodily presence of the disabled actor or dancer. One way is to emphasize the dual identification as disabled and non-disabled, as a performance artist and keynote speaker did: "Some think I am doing disability art; some think I am a plain artist. I am ready to carry what I do to the mainstream. But it will be labeled disability." The other way is to weaken the relevance of the disability label.

> "I do not identify with disability art. This is a conflict for me. In six months I may be thinking differently. I am not denying my disability, but I don't think I belong in the category. I want to be on the outside of all boxes" (performance artist).

> "Talking about disability art complicates the relation between disability and art. Not all of my work involves my body. Then the disability becomes no issue at all" (performance artist).

In sum, the artists interviewed try to balance their minority art position and their position as contributors to the art form they work in. The ambivalence was voiced by most of the artists I met, but it is most strongly experienced by the younger generation in their 20s. The younger artists tend to regard "disability art" as a term that adds a dimension to what they do, but they do not consider the disability identity as important for their role as artists.

The dual identification is also pointed out in the scholarly analysis of the work done by disabled artists. The theater scholar Carrie Sandahl (2004) has analyzed a spoken-word performance by the blind actor Lynn Manning. She points out a double-sided process. First, Manning's performance fits well with Lennard Davis's ideas of dismodernism. It visualizes a story about the vulnerable body. Manning's storytelling is about being shot and blinded in a drug dealer fight. Secondly, she points out that it is also a vital example of good old identity politics. Manning's body of difference and storytelling encourage and strengthen disabled people in their unity and struggle against oppression.

5. Discussion

As demonstrated, disability art is born out of the disability movement and the identity politics it has promoted. These are undergoing a change to include more complex views on what it is to be disabled. In my view, four positions can be outlined concerning the future of disability identity politics.

The strong position claims that disability identity politics is intrinsically related to the development of disability as a socially and culturally recognized category. Disability activism and disability studies shall address disability as a social, cultural, and political phenomenon, and strong attention shall be given to the minority group status of disabled people (Linton, 1998; Siebers, 2008). The statement by Alan Sutherland cited in the Method section of the article is one example of how the strong tradition can be enacted. To Sutherland, disability art is primarily a vehicle for disabled people in their fight against oppression.

A second position is that of the British social model proponents who emphasize disability identity politics as important, but limited in scope. They agree with the stronger position, that identity politics has developed an awareness of cultural domination and the importance of difference, and that power resides in disability pride. Nevertheless, the social model proponents assert that identity politics cannot represent the full model for understanding disability. They point out that the identity politics strain of thought tends to lose sight of the important questions concerning economic redistribution. The focus must be on the rights to employment, housing, transport, etc. In this pursuit, the disability identity approach is limited. (Barnes & Mercer, 2003; Scott-Hill, 2003). This position was brought into play when I asked two of the interviewees, both playwrights, if there was a dilemma between striving for inclusion and wanting a disability culture. In reply, they pointed out that inclusion is not to blend in and that it does not deny the celebration of difference. Inclusion must be understood in broader terms. Disabled people do not want to be the same as others, and it is not possible for them to be, either.

A third position tries to reject identity politics. People with disabilities are too diverse and non-identified to make identity politics meaningful for disability issues. Shakespeare concludes by stating that "The goal of disability politics should be to make impairment and disability irrelevant whenever possible" (Shakespeare 2006, p. 82). This position is accentuated in many forms. One radical example is the view voiced by the hard of hearing percussionist Evelyn Glennie. At the time of fieldwork, she stated in a paper on her website: "By definition being disabled means that I am not able to do something. However, except for a few minor inconveniences, I am not disabled from achieving anything in my career or private life." On the issue of disability, her focus is on how to make disability irrelevant. The paper is by 2012 removed from her website, but is still cited on several blogs and websites on deaf issues. One of the interviewees, a filmmaker, thought that Glennie was a problem for disabled people. "She does not identify, and should therefore not let herself be brought into disability-relevant contexts." The case of Evelyn Glennie also makes it very clear that disability art does not encompass all artists with disabilities. The artwork produced needs to include disability issues in some form, and the relation between the artist and the disability movement cannot be very antagonistic.

A fourth position considers the discourse on disability as universalizing. As noted in the introduction, the vulnerable body is an important site for the construction of meaning, and disability has the potential of becoming a general lens for understanding the world we live in, a world on the edge of dismodernism (Davis, 2006). In this perspective, disability is a difference, not a deficit, but simultaneously a difference that makes a difference (Thomson, 1997). One illustration of the relevance of universalism and of the dismodernism perspective was found in the interview with a performance artist: "In my work I try to make interesting and seductive images related to disability. This is political, but I am not trying to give a positive image of disability. It is about being interesting and seductive." What she does is to try to make disability important to the contemporary art scene.

Another interesting illustration of the universalizing position is that of non-disabled artists dealing with disability issues. This relation can be compared to a hot topic among curators of feminist art: Can the work of men be included in exhibitions? By some, the inclusion of men is interpreted as a phase in a linear development that has not yet occurred (Butler, 2007, p. 22). To the definition of disability art, the work of the British visual artist Marc Quinn is intriguing. His well-known sculpture of the disabled artist Allison Lapper was displayed on a prominent plinth in central London for several months in 2006, and he has made and exhibited sculptures of other disabled artists such as the actor and entertainer Mat Fraser and the performance artist Catherine Long. His critical engagement with disabled people, the history of art, and the public presence of the body through the medium of sculpture is certainly well attuned to the universalizing conception of disability in society.

The four positions outlined represent radically different viewpoints concerning disability art. How the positions are balanced will profoundly influence the development of disability art since the artists affiliated with disability art, as I have tried to demonstrate, understand their position as framed by the tensions between the positions. Disability art is born out of disability identity politics, and faces a change into a closer relation with mainstream art. This change is facilitated by changing conceptions of identity politics common to several minority art movements and, as outlined in section 3.4, by a relation to the welfare system that is peculiar to disability art.

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