us that disability is central not only to modern art but also to the way we apprehend (and interact with) bodies and buildings. Along the way, Tobin Siebers revisits the beautiful and the sublime, 'degenerate' art and 'disqualified' bodies, culture wars and condemned neighborhoods, the art of Marc Quinn and the fiction of Junot Díaz—and much, much more. *Disability Aesthetics* is a stunning achievement, a must-read for anyone interested in how to understand the world we half create and half perceive."

—MICHAEL BÉRUBÉ, Paterno Family Professor in Literature, Pennsylvania State University

"Rich with examples of the disabled body in both historical and modern art, Tobin Siebers's new book explores how disability problematizes commonly accepted ideas about aesthetics and beauty. For Siebers, disability is not a pejorative condition as much as it is a form of embodied difference. He is as comfortable discussing the Venus de Milo as he is discussing Andy Warhol. *Disability Aesthetics* is a prescient and much-needed contribution to visual and critical studies."

—JOSEPH GRIGELY, Professor of Visual & Critical Studies, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago

Disability Aesthetics is the first attempt to theorize the representation of disability in modern art and visual culture. It claims that the modern in art is perceived as disability, and that disability is evolving into an aesthetic value in itself. It argues that the essential arguments at the heart of the American culture wars in the late twentieth century involved the rejection of disability both by targeting certain artworks as "sick" and by characterizing these artworks as representative of a sick culture. The book also tracks the seminal role of National Socialism in perceiving the powerful connection between modern art and disability. It probes a variety of central aesthetic questions, producing a new understanding of art vandalism, an argument about the centrality of wounded bodies to global communication, and a systematic reading of the use put to aesthetics to justify the oppression of disabled people. In this richly illustrated and accessibly written book, Tobin Siebers masterfully demonstrates the crucial roles that the disabled mind and disabled body have played in the evolution of modern aesthetics, unveiling disability as a unique resource discovered by modern art and then embraced by it as a defining concept.

TOBIN SIEBERS is V. L. Parrington Collegiate Professor of English Language and Literature and Art and Design at the University of Michigan. His many books include *Disability Theory* and *The Subject and Other Subjects: On Ethical, Aesthetic, and Political Identity*.

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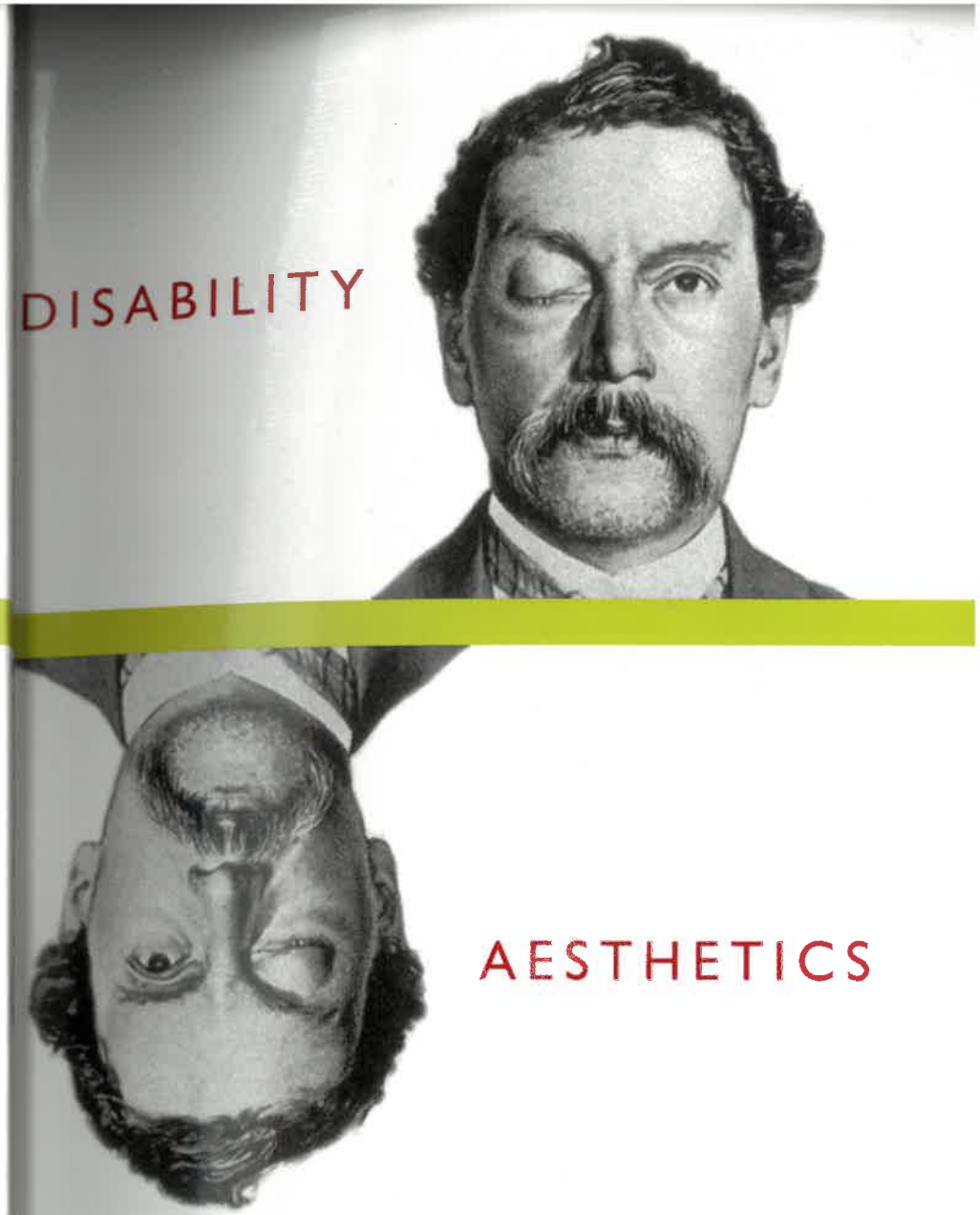

DISABILITY AESTHETICS

Tobin Siebers

Disability Aesthetics

Corporealities: Discourses of Disability

David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, editors

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Disability Aesthetics

Tobin Siebers

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Contents

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: foodstuff, 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

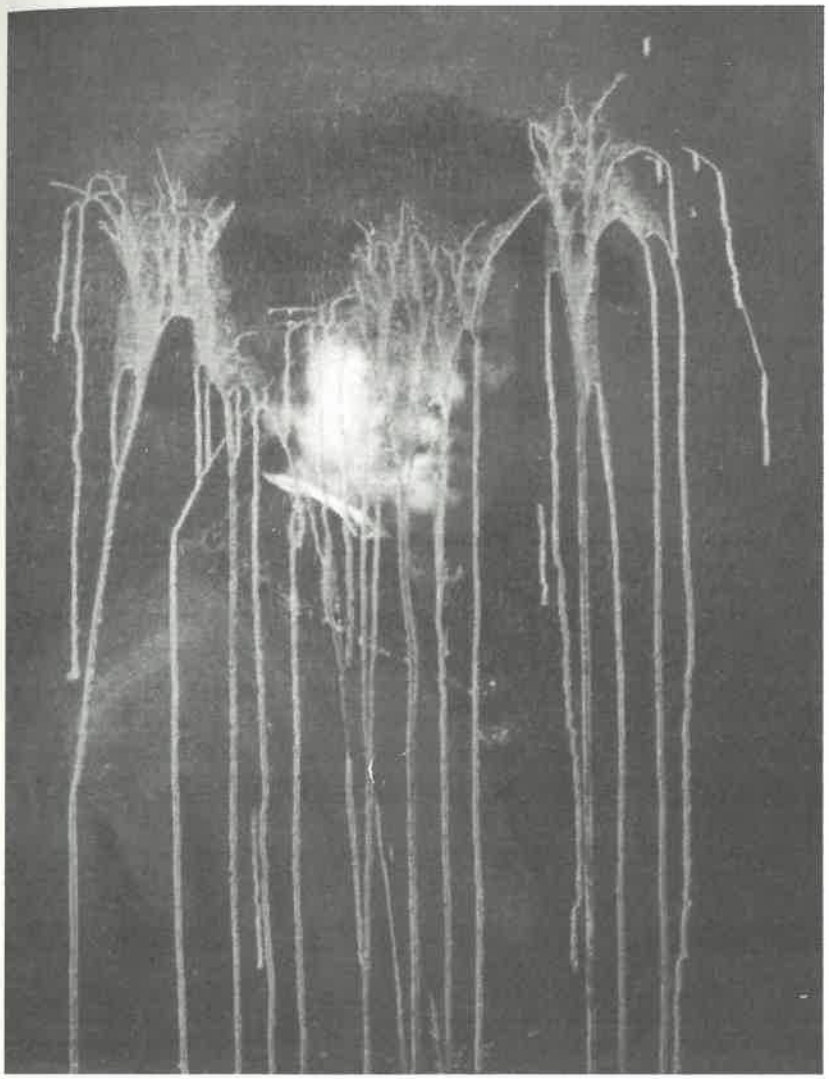

Figure 5. Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait,* damaged by acid in 1977

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

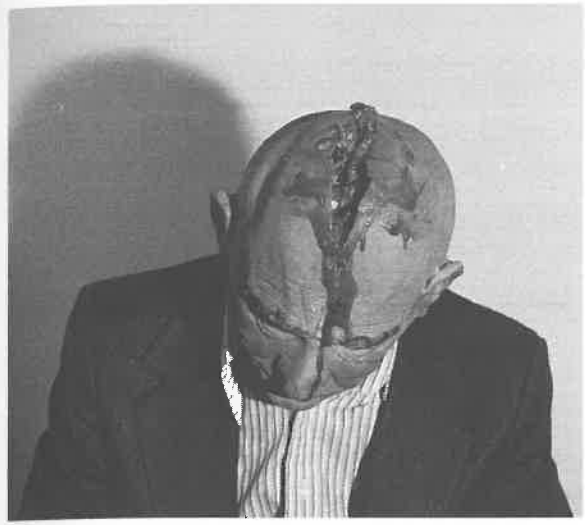

Figure 6. Paul McCarthy, *Hollywood Halloween*, 1977, performance

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*

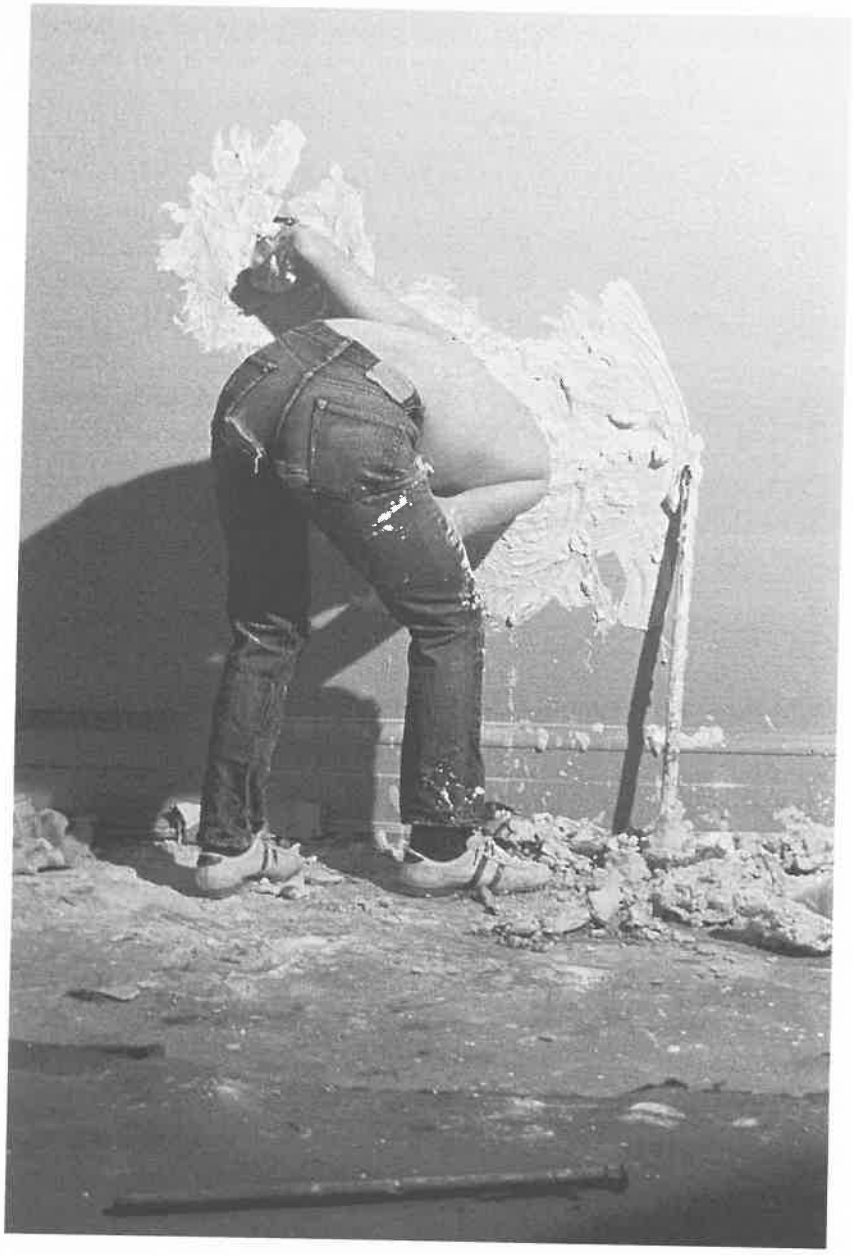

Figure 8. Paul McCarthy, *Plaster Your Head and One Arm into a Wall,* 1973, performance

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

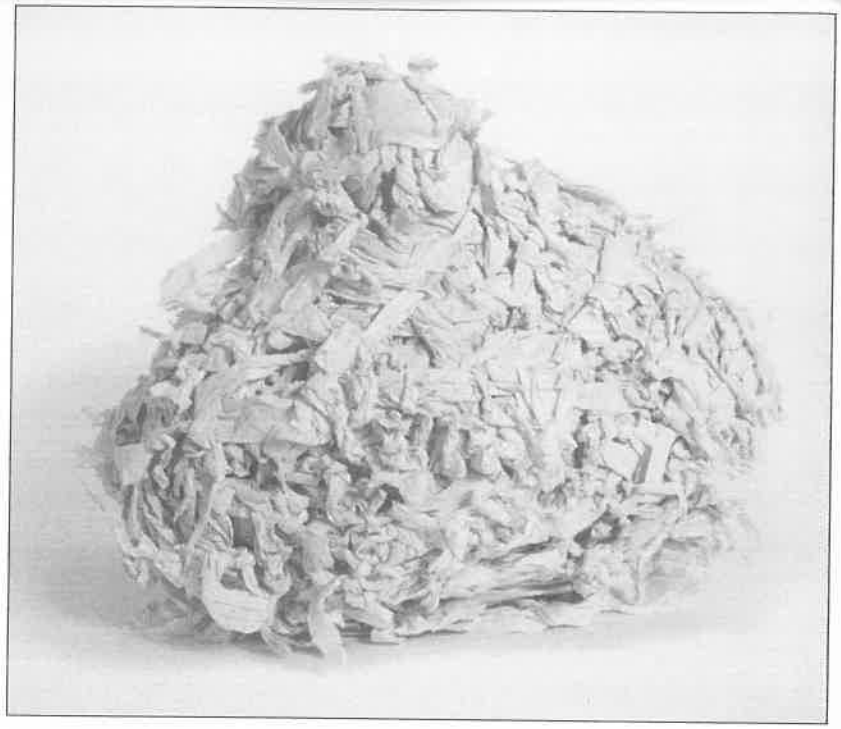

Figure 10. Judith Scott, untitled, no date, Creative Growth Center

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.

Chapter 2

The Aesthetics of Human Disqualification

Smile Train, an international organization devoted to children with cleft palette, seems in many ways to be a model charity. It trains and uses local doctors. It claims to put 100 percent of contributions toward surgeries. But Smile Train is a model charity in more than one way. It promotes itself by giving a familiar and typical appearance to disability, following an aesthetic model long established for the purpose of qualifying some people and disqualifying others. The "world's leading cleft charity" uses in-your-face, close-up portraits of disabled children, largely of color and non-Western, to encourage donations to the "modern-day medical miracle" designed "to give a desperate child not just a new smile, but a new life" (fig. 12).[1] Smile Train equates disability with loss of life, isolating the children from everyday existence and exhibiting them in a series of medical mug shots. Individuality is downplayed, and the children appear first and foremost as medical specimens of nature gone awry, displayed to elicit feelings of pity, disgust, and charity. The children's color, non-Western origin, and disabled state stand in sharp contrast to the white, smiling, celebrity friends, such as Candice Bergen, who urge donors to be generous.[2] Smile Train "enfreaks" the children, to use David Hevey's term, only to promise to whisk away their freakish nature through the magic of modern medical technology.[3]

Let me note from the outset that I am not opposing the sharing of

Figure 12. Smile Train website, February 2008

medical technology across the globe, the assistance of poor nations by wealthy nations, or the creation of charities and nongovernmental organizations devoted to particular world problems. These are desperate times, and many people in the world need help. Rather, what concerns me is the symbolism by which populations and individuals are established as needing help, as being inferior, and the role played by disability in that symbolism, because it has a long history of being placed in the service of discrimination, inequality, and violence. What I am calling the aesthetics of human disqualification focuses on how ideas about appearance contribute to these and other forms of oppression. My claim is that this symbolism depends on aesthetic representations that require further clarification

and critique, especially with respect to how individuals are disqualified, that is, how they are found lacking, inept, incompetent, inferior, in need, incapable, degenerate, uneducated, weak, ugly, underdeveloped, diseased, immature, unskilled, frail, uncivilized, defective, and so on. My intention is less to provide a theoretical description of this problem than to review a series of analytic examples from the historical record, but I will begin by defining my theoretical vocabulary and presuppositions.

Three Definitions

Disqualification as a symbolic process removes individuals from the ranks of quality human beings, putting them at risk of unequal treatment, bodily harm, and death. That people may be subjected to violence if they do not achieve a prescribed level of quality is an injustice rarely questioned. In fact, even though we may redefine what we mean by quality people, for example as historical minorities are allowed to move into their ranks, we have not yet ceased to believe that nonquality human beings do exist and that they should be treated differently from people of quality. Harriet McBryde Johnson's debate with Peter Singer provides a recent example of the widespread belief in the existence of nonquality human beings (Johnson). Johnson, a disability activist, argues that all disabled people qualify as persons who have the same rights as everyone else. Singer, a moral philosopher at Princeton University, claims to the contrary that people with certain disabilities should be euthanized, especially if they are thought to be in pain, because they do not qualify as persons. Similarly, Martha Nussbaum, the University of Chicago moral philosopher, establishes a threshold below which "a fully human life, a life worthy of human dignity," is not possible (181). In particular, she notes that the onset of certain disabilities may reduce a person to the status of former human being: "we may say of some conditions of a being, let us say a permanent vegetative state of a (former) human being, that this just is not a human life at all" (181).

Surprisingly little thought and energy have been given to disputing the belief that nonquality human beings do exist. This belief is so robust that it supports the most serious and characteristic injustices of our day. Disqualification at this moment in time justifies discrimination, servi-

tude, imprisonment, involuntary institutionalization, euthanasia, human and civil rights violations, military intervention, compulsory sterilization, police actions, assisted suicide, capital punishment, and murder. It is my contention that disqualification finds support in the way that bodies appear and in their specific appearances—that is, disqualification is justified through the accusation of mental or physical inferiority based on aesthetic principles.

Disqualification is produced by naturalizing inferiority as the justification for unequal treatment, violence, and oppression. According to Snyder and Mitchell, disability serves in the modern period as "the master trope of human disqualification."[4] They argue that disability represents a marker of otherness that establishes differences between human beings not as acceptable or valuable variations but as dangerous deviations. Douglas Baynton provides compelling examples from the modern era, explaining that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States disability identity disqualified other identities defined by gender, race, class, and nationality. Women were deemed inferior because they were said to have mental and physical disabilities. People of color had fewer rights than other persons based on accusations of biological inferiority. Immigrants were excluded from entry into the United States when they were poor, sick, or failed standardized tests, even though the populations already living there were poor, sick, and failed standardized tests. In every case, disability identity served to justify oppression by amplifying ideas about inferiority already attached to other minority identities. Disability is the trope by which the assumed inferiority of these other minority identities achieved expression.

The appearance of lesser mental and physical abilities disqualifies people as inferior and justifies their oppression. Thanks to the work of Baynton and others, it is now possible to recognize disability as a trope used to posit the inferiority of certain minority populations, but it remains extremely difficult to understand that mental and physical markers of inferiority are also tropes placed in the service of disability oppression. Before disability can be used as a disqualifier, disability, too, has to be disqualified. Beneath the troping of blackness as inbuilt inferiority, for example, lies the troping of disability as inferior. Beneath the troping of femininity as biological deficiency lies the troping of disability as deficiency. The mental and physical properties of bodies become the natural symbols of inferiority via a

process of disqualification that seems biological, not cultural—which is why disability discrimination seems to be a medical rather than a social problem. If we consider how difficult it is at this moment to disqualify people as inferior on the basis of their racial, sexual, gender, or class characteristics, we may come to recognize the ground that we must cover in the future before we experience the same difficulty disqualifying people as inferior on the basis of disability. We might also recognize the work that disability performs at present in situations where race, sexuality, gender, and class are used to disqualify people as physically or mentally inferior. At the current time we prefer to fix, cure, or eradicate the disabled body rather than the discriminatory attitudes of society. Medicine and charity, not social justice, are the answers to the problems of the disabled body, because the disabled body is thought to be the real cause of the problems. Disability is a personal misfortune or tragedy that puts people at risk of a nonquality existence—or so most people falsely believe.

Aesthetics studies the way that some bodies make other bodies feel. Bodies, minimally defined, are what appear in the world. They involve manifestations of physical appearance, whether this appearance is defined as the physical manifestation itself or as the particular appearance of a given physical manifestation. Bodies include in my definition human bodies, paintings, sculpture, buildings, the entire range of human artifacts as well as animals and objects in the natural world. Aesthetics, moreover, has always stressed that feelings produced in bodies by other bodies are involuntary, as if they represented a form of unconscious communication between bodies, a contagious possession of one body by another. Aesthetics is the domain in which the sensation of otherness is felt at its most powerful, strange, and frightening. Whether the effect is beauty and pleasure, ugliness and pain, or sublimity and terror, the emotional impact of one body on another is experienced as an assault on autonomy and a testament to the power of otherness. Aesthetics is the human science most concerned with invitations to think and feel otherwise about our own influence, interests, and imagination.

Of course, when bodies produce feelings of pleasure or pain, they also invite judgments about whether they should be accepted or rejected in the human community. People thought to experience more pleasure or pain than others or to produce unusual levels of pleasure and pain in other bodies are among the bodies most discriminated against, actively

excluded, and violated on the current scene, be they disabled, sexed, gendered, or racialized bodies. Disabled people, but also sex workers, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people, and people of color, are tortured and killed because of beliefs about their relationship to pain and pleasure (Siebers 2009). This is why aesthetic disqualification is not merely a matter for art critics or museum directors but a political process of concern to us all. An understanding of aesthetics is crucial because it reveals the operative principles of disqualification used in minority oppression.

Oppression is the systematic victimization of one group by another. It is a form of intergroup violence. That oppression involves "groups," and not "individuals," means that it concerns identities, and this means, furthermore, that oppression always focuses on how the body appears, both on how it appears as a public and physical presence and on its specific and various appearances. Oppression is justified most often by the attribution of natural inferiority—what some call "in-built" or "biological" inferiority. Natural inferiority is always somatic, focusing on the mental and physical features of the group, and it figures as disability. The prototype of biological inferiority is disability. The representation of inferiority always comes back to the appearance of the body and the way the body makes other bodies feel. This is why the study of oppression requires an understanding of aesthetics—not only because oppression uses aesthetic judgments for its violence but also because the signposts of how oppression works are visible in the history of art, where aesthetic judgments about the creation and appreciation of bodies are openly discussed.

Two additional thoughts must be noted before I treat some analytic examples from the historical record. First, despite my statement that disability now serves as the master trope of human disqualification, it is not a matter of reducing other minority identities to disability identity. Rather, it is a matter of understanding the work done by disability in oppressive systems. In disability oppression, the physical and mental properties of the body are socially constructed as disqualifying defects, but this specific type of social construction happens to be integral at the present moment to the symbolic requirements of oppression in general. In every oppressive system of our day, I want to claim, the oppressed identity is represented in some way as disabled, and although it is hard to understand, the same process obtains when disability is the oppressed identity. "Racism" disqualifies on the basis of race, providing justification for the inferiority of

certain skin colors, bloodlines, and physical features. "Sexism" disqualifies on the basis of sex/gender as a direct representation of mental and physical inferiority. "Classism" disqualifies on the basis of family lineage and socioeconomic power as proof of inferior genealogical status. "Ableism" disqualifies on the basis of mental and physical differences, first selecting and then stigmatizing them as disabilities. The oppressive system occults in each case the fact that the disqualified identity is socially constructed, a mere convention, representing signs of incompetence, weakness, or inferiority as undeniable facts of nature.

Second, it is crucial to remember the lessons of intersectional theory. This theory rightly focuses on how oppressive systems affect the identity of the oppressed individual, explaining that because individuality is complex, containing many overlapping identities, the individual is vulnerable to oppressive systems that would reduce the individual to one or two identities for the purpose of maintaining power and control (Collins 208).[5] Intersectional theorists restore a complex view of the individual and fight against creating hierarchies between different identities. For example, the debate whether it is worse to be black or female is viewed as divisive and unproductive. My tactic here is similar. I want to look at identity not from the point of view of the oppressed individual but from the point of view—limited as it may seem and significant because limited—of oppressive systems. Disability is the master trope of human disqualification, not because disability theory is superior to race, class, or sex/gender theory, but because all oppressive systems function by reducing human variation to deviancy and inferiority defined on the mental and physical plane.

Intersectional analysis shows that disability identity provides a foundation for disqualification in cases where other minority identities fail because they are known to be socially constructed for the purposes of domination. It is not clear why disability has proven so useful a trope for maintaining oppression, but one reason may be that it has been extraordinarily difficult to separate disability from the naturalist fallacy that conceives of it as a biological defect more or less resistant to social or cultural intervention. In the modern era, of course, eugenics embodies this fallacy. Eugenics has been of signal importance to oppression because eugenics weds medical science to a disgust with mental and physical variation, but eugenics is not a new trend, only an exacerbation of old trends that invoke disease, inferiority, impairment, and deformity to disqualify one group in

the service of another's rise to power. As racism, sexism, and classism fall away slowly as justifications for human inferiority—and the critiques of these prejudices prove powerful examples of how to fight oppression—the prejudice against disability remains in full force, providing seemingly credible reasons for the belief in human inferiority and the oppressive systems built upon it. This usage will continue, I expect, until we reach a historical moment when we know as much about the social construction of disability as we now know about the social construction of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Disability represents at this moment in time the final frontier of justifiable human inferiority.

Three Analytic Examples

The aesthetics of human disqualification presents in almost every sphere of human influence, but because the art world thrives on aesthetic judgments, art-making practices and debates about them provide a unique window into disqualifying and qualifying statements about human appearance, made almost always, of course, in the guise of judgments of taste. Oddly, although the source of disqualification is not the aesthetic itself, the devices of disqualification are often worked through in the aesthetic context—at museums, art shows, in literary works, music, art catalogs, magazines, and by entertainments of various kinds. My itinerary begins with a focus on the Nazi era because of its definitive and violent interpretation of modern art as part of a medical and eugenic project that disqualifies certain populations as defective. Then I jump forward in time to the controversial display in 2005 of Marc Quinn's sculpture of Alison Lapper in London's Trafalgar Square. Here I address the debate about whether disabled bodies should be subjects of art and displayed in public spaces. Finally, I conclude by looking at a 2008 essay in *Newsweek* magazine that reproduces medical photographs from the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia in a gesture embracing the tradition of the freak show. Each analytic example demonstrates the shuttling back and forth of aesthetic judgments between the art world and the political world, providing the occasion to map the operative principles obtaining between aesthetics, disqualification, and oppression.

Degenerate Art and Defective People. Although the Nazis were not shy about using disability to disqualify human beings, these attitudes acquired even greater transparency in statements about the art world. Hitler's love of art and conception of himself as an artist—as preposterous as they may seem—meant that art was the preferred vehicle for the development of Nazi ideas and philosophy. It was also the domain where we see played out Nazi ideas about nonquality human beings. The competition in 1937 between the Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung (Great German Art Exhibition) and the exhibit of Entartete Kunst (Degenerate Art) makes the use of aesthetic disqualification by the Nazis' crystal clear by setting in opposition their positive and negative conceptions of human types. The Degenerate Art exhibition represented the Nazis' attack on modern art because of its portrayal of "defective" people, while the Great German Art Exhibition, with which Hitler inaugurated the House of German Art, was supposed to demonstrate the superiority of German bloodlines and aesthetic taste. The purposes of the two exhibitions could not have been more different, but their occurrence in the same year provides the occasion to construct from their negative and positive views of human appearance a clear conception of the Nazi system of aesthetic disqualification.[6]

The works included in the Great German Art Exhibition avoid representing physical imperfection and racial diversity at all costs. The Nazis staked their claim to superiority on the representation of beautiful and healthy German bodies, although the works are now indistinguishable from kitsch. The controlling design of the exhibition came directly from Hitler's ideas about art, as revealed by many public statements. Hitler embraced health and racial homogeneity as the measures of quality human beings. Disease and disability were his principal disqualifiers. "The German people," Hitler exclaimed, "with their newly awakened affirmation of life are seized with admiration for strength and beauty and therefore for what is healthy and vigorous" (Adam 76). "We only want the celebration of the healthy body in art" (Adam 149). The House of German Art was to open its doors only to ability, not disability.

In contrast, Hitler accused the modern works shown in the Entartete Kunst exhibit of reveling in "deformed cripples and cretins, women who inspire only disgust, men who are more like wild beasts, children who, if they were alive, would be regarded as God's curse!" (Sax and Kuntz 230). As evidence for Nazi claims about the biological inferiority of the subjects pictured in modern art, the catalog designed to accompany Entartete

Figure 13. Paul Klee and "Schizophrenic," Germany, Entartete Kunst exhibition catalog, 1937

Kunst juxtaposed modernist works and examples of facial deformities as well as works by modern artists and mental patients. The catalog claims, for example, that a painting by a "schizophrenic from a lunatic asylum" "looks more human than Paul Klee's botched effort" (Barron 383) (fig. 13). Entartete Kunst asks beholders not only to cast the psychological sources of modern art as mentally incompetent but also to confuse modernist experiments with form with realistic depictions of disabled human beings. Paul Schultze-Naumburg, author in 1928 of *Kunst und Rasse,* provides an early example of the strategy used by Entartete Kunst to denigrate modern art; the book compares portraits by Modigliani, Schmidt-Rottluff, and others to medical photographs of physically disabled and diseased patients (figs. 3 and 4).[7] Similarly, Entartete Kunst either interpreted artworks as medical specimens or juxtaposed artworks with medical photographs

and other artifacts. The exhibition sought to tutor the public in the Nazi vision of aesthetics by suggesting the negative medical impact that disabled and racially diverse people might have on the German population. In effect, beholders were supposed to see the so-called degenerate works through Nazi eyes as picturing examples of in-built inferiority, providing an experience of disability preliminary to the extermination of more than 200,000 human beings with similar characteristics.[8]

Degeneration was principally a medical term before Max Nordau applied it to art. It referred throughout the last half of the nineteenth century to individuals who departed from norms of human health because of genetic difference, sexual habits deemed excessive, or shattered nerves. The Nazis applied these distinctions as standards of aesthetic beauty. Degenerate art deserved its name in their view because it included bodily deformities, bloodshot eyes, feebleness, and signs of nervous exhaustion—all disabling conditions supposedly brought about by racial impurity or the stress of modern life. Jews, homosexuals, and criminals were automatically assumed to be biologically inferior, and the Nazis found evidence for their assumptions in the physical traits given to people in works of modern art.

The works banned as degenerate by the Nazis are more familiar in their form and content than those approved by them. Consequently, it makes sense to focus first on the so-called Great German Art, so that we may let the full power of defamiliarization strike us when we turn to the better-known works and artists. The point of the comparison, I remind, is to gain an understanding of the aesthetics of human disqualification, not to make judgments about which objects are better works of art. This goal requires attention to the contribution of aesthetics to oppression, that is, to the choice of appearance placed in the service of intergroup or political violence.

The Great German Art works to achieve qualification for the German people by designing a specific though imaginary human type based on the healthy and able body. This type was proposed as the norm, and deviation from it tended to justify disqualification and oppression. One of the oddities revealed by a disability studies perspective on aesthetics, however, is how truly unreal and imaginary are nondisabled conceptions of the human body. Remove imperfection from the body, and one discovers the perfect recipe for what does not exist for the most part in the human uni-

verse. Disability theorists are fond of noting that nondisabled bodies are all alike, while disability takes a thousand unique and different forms. If the strength of human nature lies in its evolutionary compact with variation, then the Nazi drive toward perfection based on uniformity produces results contrary to the laws of evolution. The Great German Art refuses variation by embracing an idea of human form characterized by exaggerated perfection and striking regularity. Arno Breker's *Readiness* represents the perfect picture of health and ability, but it is deeply unreal and stumbles into pure kitsch: its pumped-up body, thought classical by the Nazis, actually swerves away from its Greek models to present a profile and shape outside the bounds of human form (fig. 2). Famously called Hitler's Michelangelo, Breker preferred to model his sculptures on the bodies of athletes, but his works seem more frequently to represent bodybuilders—shapes contoured by steroids rather than sport and dubious as examples of male beauty.

"There is no exquisite beauty," Francis Bacon claimed, "without some strangeness in the proportion." By these lights, the only thing beautiful about Ivo Saliger's *Diana's Rest* is the peculiar fact that the three women are all exactly the same (color pl. 2). It is a convention of painting to base multiple figures on the same model, but in this example the convention springs from the ideological imperative to achieve human perfection by suppressing individual variation. *Diana's Rest* provides an example of the eerie world, sought by the Nazis, in which the desire for perfection quashes individuality and variety. Josef Thorak's *Comradeship* demonstrates the masculine version of this overcharged regularity (fig. 14). Matched muscle for muscle, the gigantic figures twin each other, while striving to embody an impossible ideal of human health. According to Hitler's address at the opening of the Great German Art Exhibition, the Nazi eugenic project required an emphasis on beauty and health as the first step in achieving the goal of creating a new human type. "The new age of today is at work on a new human type," Hitler remarks: "Tremendous efforts are being made in countless spheres of life in order to elevate our people, to make our men, boys, lads, girls, and women more healthy and thereby stronger and more beautiful. From this strength and beauty streams forth a new feeling of life, and a new joy in life. Never before was humanity in its external appearance and perceptions closer to the ancient world than it is today" (Sax and Kuntz 230).[9] Strangeness in proportion in either individual human figures or among them is deliberately eschewed in Nazi art because its goal is to portray a new human being whose embodiment of beauty and health results in an almost obscene regularity of features and body parts.

Figure 14. Josef Thorak, *Comradeship*, 1937, Germany, Great German Art Exhibition, 1937

The image of nature in the Great German Art mirrors its treatment of the human body in the emphasis on banal, unvarying, and exaggerated perfection. If German blood issues supposedly from the soil, the picture

of meadow, pasture, and forest in Nazi art seeks an image of nature that supposedly proves the superiority and durability of the German people. Nature in Nazi art is all abundance, but the ripeness is so artificial that it seems—and there is no irony intended—to bulge with decay. It has often been noted that Nazi artists take their image of nature from the tradition of German Romantic art, especially the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich. The influence, however, is vastly overstated. Friedrich's nature scenes possess an aura of desolation, focusing often on a lone marker in the landscape such as a cross, a solitary figure, a crumbling church, a dead tree, or a broken grave marker. There are no dead trees, ruins, or broken graves in Nazi landscapes—no hint of the weight of time or the inevitability of death blemishing nature's bounty. Rather, nature exists as an eternal plenitude resistant to decay and death. For example, Oskar Martin-Amorbach's *The Sower* displays a blond peasant, marching across a field and smiling at the good earth in satisfaction, against a backdrop of vast blue sky and other fields being prepared for planting—all of the elements united by a rainbow as if to testify to a Nazi covenant with nature (color pl. 9). There is not a single dead tree in view, no plant that is not ready to burst into full bloom. Gisbert Palmié's *Rewards of Work* represents the same vision of nature (color pl. 10). The figures in the foreground, all surrounded by friendly animals and involved in expressions of antiquated labor (weaving on a spinning wheel, gathering fruit in a basket, harvesting wheat in sheaves), focus their attention on a nude blond goddess, apparently work's reward personified, from whom flows an almost infinite trail of golden cloth. In the background blossoms a spectacle of unspoiled nature: a bright sky, flowing river, abundant trees, and grassy meadows. No one aware of the earth's seasons could find in Nazi art the smallest semblance of nature's passage from birth and fullness to death and rebirth. Rather, nature seems fixed in an unending summer, never displaying the slightest hint of autumn, let alone the death of winter—a testimony to the Nazi hope that the Third Reich might endure without change for a thousand years.

Compared to the Great German Art, the art labeled degenerate by the Nazis presents a startling variety of human appearances. But more startling are the suggestions, first, that this variety is an effect of including disability and, second, that the Nazis were the first to recognize the aesthetic centrality of disability to modern art. It is not merely the case

that the Nazis preferred representational art to Dada or expressionism, that they disliked broken lines and unnaturalistic uses of color, that they wanted artists only and always to draw or paint or sculpt with the greatest technical skill. They preferred all these things because they interpreted their opposites as signposts of disability. The techniques of Dada and expressionism deform the bodies rendered by them, seeming to portray disabled people. The palette of modernism paints human faces in greens, yellows, and purples, embracing discoloration without rejecting attendant associations of disease. The modernist determination to flatten the canvas and to draw attention to the sculptural quality of paint often stunts figures, bending and twisting them into anagrams of disability. Moreover, the attention given by modern art to themes of alienation, violence, panic, terror, sensory overload, and distraction requires an openness to disability as a visible and potent symbolization of these themes. People quivering with anxiety, howling in fear, or cringing in silent terror populate modernist canvases, openly embracing situations and conditions thought abnormal and feared by the Nazis. The Nazis waged war against modern art because they interpreted the modern in art as disability, and they were essentially right in their interpretation, for modern art might indeed be named as the movement that finds its greatest aesthetic resource in bodies previously considered to be broken, diseased, wounded, or disabled.

If modern art has had such enormous success, it is because of its embrace of disability as a distinct version of the beautiful. The Nazis grasped the nature of this aesthetic, but they rejected it, misreading the future direction of art as they misread many other things about human culture. Instead, they attacked modern art for the very features that give it such remarkable imaginative and transformative power to represent the human condition—be it the capacity to claim through formal experiments and new content a vast array of human emotions, thoughts, and physical appearances or be it the confidence to leave behind the imitation of nature and to represent what nature might reject or fail to conceive.

Hitler's remarks on the modernist palette exemplify the tendency to associate invention in modern art with human impairment. Hitler disqualifies artists who apply imaginative uses of color by calling their vision defective:

> From the pictures submitted for exhibition, I must assume that the

> eye of some men shows them things different from the way they really are. They really are men who can see in the shapes of our people only decayed cretins, who feel the meadows as blue, the heavens green, clouds sulphur yellow. . . . I only want to prevent these pitiable unfortunates, who clearly suffer from defective vision, from attempting with their chatter to force on their contemporaries the results of their faulty observation, and indeed from presenting them as "art." (Sax and Kuntz 230)

More significant than blaming modernist techniques on disability, however, is the Nazi use of modern art to illustrate people, trends, and conditions called degenerate. This point cannot be overstated. For the Nazis, modern art provided evidence in support of the medical and eugenic rejection of disability. The modernist interest in deformation of the human body and in new techniques of representation combined to produce visions of human appearance that demonstrated to Nazi eyes the evils of miscegenation, the devastating effects of modern life on the human nervous system, and the danger of allowing disabled people and racial inferiors to reproduce themselves. The Nazi way of life, once established by total warfare against and extermination of everything not German, would presumably have existed in stark opposition to the world pictured by modern art.

Consider Emil Nolde's *Mulatto* and Ludwig Meidner's *Self-Portrait.* Although a Nazi sympathizer, Nolde found his works displayed at the Entartete Kunst exhibit because of his embrace of modernist themes and techniques. The title of *The Mulatto* serves as a red flag for Nazi disapproval, but it is finally Nolde's modernist aesthetic that marks the woman in the portrait as "degenerate" (color pl. 11). Her patchy coloration, overbite, frizzy hair, and narrow eyes suggest in-built inferiority to the Nazi medical gaze. She demonstrates for the Nazis what mixing races will produce and supplies evidence for the necessity of keeping German bloodlines pure. Ludwig Meidner, the Jewish expressionist painter who initially made a reputation for himself by producing horrific landscapes of life in the modern city, later became a prolific self-portraitist. The Nazis included his *Self-Portrait* in the "Jewish room" of Entartete Kunst as proof of the defective nature of the Jewish people, scratching above the painting the words, "Jewish, all too Jewish" and referring to the work in the catalog as one of "three specimens of Jewish sculpture and painting" (Barron 298). The curation for the Jewish room announced its purpose as the "Revelation of

the Jewish racial soul" (Barron 194). What the Nazis saw in the portrait, and wanted others to see, one can only imagine. A misshaped face, elfin ears, deformed hand, and twisted body—all rendered in unnaturalistic colors—seem to attest to the biological inferiority of Jews (color pl. 12).

Another category significant for the definition of degenerate art and its reliance on disability as a marker of disqualification touches on antiwar art. Beginning with Callot and Goya and increasing in importance with the rise of photography, images of wounded soldiers, victims of torture, maimed civilians, and devastated cities have played a crucial role in the critique of warmongering among nations. This tradition pictures disability as the measure of the evils of warfare, and although this usage stigmatizes the wounded person as an allegorical symbol of the horrors of war, it nevertheless makes an important contribution to the inclusion of disability, injury, and disease in the history of visual culture, one that endures to this day, most recently in the photographs of torture taken at Abu Ghraib. Hitler's war machine had every reason to resist this tradition, and artists critical of warfare soon found themselves labeled as degenerate. Like Hitler, Ernest Ludwig Kirchner went to war to defend Germany, but he was horrified by what he saw in the trenches of World War I. He had a nervous breakdown and represented the cost of war in the poignant and powerful *Self-Portrait as a Soldier,* included in the Entartete Kunst exhibit. The painting shows Kirchner in full dress uniform, exhibiting the bloody stump of his severed right hand against the background of a Baconesque meaty collage and a nude woman (color pl. 13). The attack against him as a degenerate artist threw Kirchner into despair, as more than 600 of his works were confiscated. He committed suicide on June 15, 1938. Otto Dix is another powerful critic of the war ethic. His series *War* was attacked as degenerate, both because it is antiwar and because it uses ghastly images of war victims to depict the horrors of war. *Transplant* pictures a man in a hospital bed, his face torn asunder, with brains exposed, patched up with chunks of flesh designed to stand in for his nose, cheek, and forehead (fig. 15). *Skull* represents a fleshless head, a scraggly crop of hair spouting from the head and the lip, mingled with worms busily devouring the residues of this former person's brain (fig. 16).

The aesthetic vocabulary used by the Nazis to attack their victims is the invention of modern art—stolen to support a perverse and violent cause. The casualties of war represented in modern art display fragilities

Figure 15. Otto Dix, *Transplant,* from *War* series, 1924

of the human mind and body that the Nazis used not to denounce war but to condemn certain populations and races. The focus of modern artists on the dangers of industrialization and crowded cities was made to support the idea that human beings best inhabit the archaic landscape of Nazi homelands. The images of diverse peoples from across the globe, celebrated in modern art, represent an openness to human variation that nevertheless struck Hitler's faithful as embracing degenerate, defective, and racially inferior people. The Nazis reinterpreted what they saw in modern art and put it in the service of an aesthetics of human disqualification, setting images, shapes, and human forms to oppressive and violent ends never imagined by modern artists themselves. In no way did the direction and inclination of modern art share in the prejudices and hatreds of the Nazis, but with a brutal twist of interpretation, they turned the expansiveness of human types found in modern art into a condemnation of everything not their own. They created once and for all a system of disqualification that justifies exclusion and genocide—a system whose aesthetic principles still rationalize oppression today.

Figure 16. Otto Dix, *Skull,* from *War* series, 1924

Alison Lapper Pregnant: "Why Shouldn't My Body Be Considered Art?"

The most significant aspects of Entartete Kunst, if we listen to the Nazis who toured it, were the feelings of revulsion that the artworks were supposed to excite in beholders. These works were revolting, of course, because they used disability to prove the degeneracy of modern existence. "All around us you see the monstrous offspring of insanity, impudence, ineptitude, and sheer degeneracy," explained the introduction to the Entartete Kunst catalog; "What this exhibition offers inspires horror and disgust in us all" ("Nazi Treasure Trove"). The aesthetic disqualification of disabled people has remained remarkably consistent over time, linking the emergence of eugenics in the late nineteenth century and its applications in Great Britain, the United States, and Nazi Germany to unproductive and inac-

curate stereotypes causally expressed today in discussions about health care, civil rights, neonatal testing, euthanasia, wrongful birth, reproductive care, assisted suicide, abortion, and quality of life. Although we seem to have moved to some degree beyond the idea that certain racial, ethnic, gendered, and sexed identities represent nonquality human beings, there continues to be widespread acceptance of the prejudice that individual human beings, of whatever race, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality, might be classified as inferior on the basis of injury, illness, disability, intelligence, or genetic traits.

When incorporated into works of art, however, the forms of aesthetic appearance that disqualify individual human beings as defective produce an entirely different set of meanings and emotions. Modern art claims disability as the virtuoso sign of the aesthetic, increasingly presenting disability as an aesthetic value in itself. Far from designing representations to mark human beings as inferior, modern art turns to disability, I have been arguing, as a new and powerful resource for promoting aesthetic variation, self-transformation, and beauty. Nevertheless, the radical gesture of rooting aesthetics in the representation of the disabled body produces an interpretive dilemma, one first discovered by the Nazis and still found almost everywhere in the art world today. As modern art increasingly defines its future direction in terms of disability, artists represent disabled bodies more and more explicitly as aesthetic objects, and the beholders of these objects must choose whether to embrace or to reject the strong feelings excited by disability. On the one hand, because modern art embraces disability as an aesthetic value in itself, there seem to be few objects with greater potential than disabled bodies to qualify as works of art. The modern in art manifests itself as disability, and disabled bodies possess an aura that seems to satisfy the artistic desire for new, varied, and beautiful forms of appearance. On the other hand, aesthetic objects symbolizing disability are sufficiently disruptive that some beholders are tempted to reject modern art as "sick" and "ugly" and to call for alternative forms of art that are "healthy" and "beautiful." The alliance between modern art and disability becomes the cause for disgust, complaints, and doubts, resulting in culture wars targeting the art world itself. Disability is mustered as evidence that art as a whole has succumbed to sickness and degeneracy.

In 2004, Marc Quinn began to exhibit a series of works that advances the modern preoccupation with disability as a key aesthetic concept as

well as probes the strong feelings of prejudice that disabled bodies excite in other bodies. *The Complete Marbles* revise the tradition of classical fragmentary sculpture for the modern day by representing likenesses of people who in real life have missing limbs, establishing a powerful resonance between artworks long considered beautiful because of their broken state and people whose disabilities would seem to exclude them from the category of aesthetic beauty. One marble won the competition of the Fourth Plinth Commissioning Group and was installed on Trafalgar Square in London, immediately sparking a heated debate about the kinds of bodies thought permissible to exhibit in public. *Alison Lapper Pregnant,* juxtaposed with a king, two generals, and the naval hero Admiral Nelson, depicts a nude woman, three and a half meters high, weighing thirteen tons, and carved from snow-white Carrara marble. She is also eight months pregnant and has foreshortened legs and no arms (color pl. 14).[10] Quinn explained that Nelson's Column, the focal point of Trafalgar Square, is "the epitome of a phallic male monument" and that "the square needed some femininity" (Reynolds). The sculpture repulsed some beholders, while exhilarating others. Some decried the display of a disabled person in a public square, but others celebrated it, pointing out that Admiral Nelson was also disabled. All beholders, however, had a difficult time not revealing their feelings about disability, and these feelings, negative for the most part, affected the sculpture's value and identity as a work of art, not to mention contributing to the ongoing stigmatization of disabled people.[11]

The negative responses by critics to Quinn's work are especially revealing because they fixate on disability as an unacceptable subject for art, while trying to justify by other means the revulsion stirring them. At the same time, the commentators often embrace illiterate positions on disability, praising or pitying the people depicted in the works merely because of their impairments. Robert Simon, editor of the *British Art Journal,* calls Lapper "very brave" but concludes that the sculpture is "just a repellant artifact" (Lyall). Theodore Dalrymple in *City Journal* praises Lapper's "admirable courage" only to mount a personal attack against her. He dismisses her as "a single mother sporting ironmongery in her nose," who "has shrewdly (and, in her circumstances, understandably) commodified her armlessness, turning it to an advantage." Dalrymple apparently accepts that disability may be represented in art—since he notes that "some of the greatest paintings by one of the greatest artists of all time,

Diego Velázquez, are of dwarfs"—but he concludes that Lapper's image, given over to "narcissism, self-pity, and self-obsession," falls well short of Velázquez's "statements of his deeply felt and completely sincere humanity." Apparently, neither Quinn nor Lapper is a good example of humanity. Hilton Kramer in the *New York Observer* calls Quinn's marbles "an amazing performance," "if you have the stomach for it," accusing the artist of turning beholders into "voyeurs of a succession of personal catastrophes—an experience that bears a distinct resemblance to involuntary encounters with pornography." Finally, in an opinion piece in the *Guardian,* illustrated by a photograph of pigeons swarming over the surface of the sculpture and hatefully captioned "Pigeon Toes," Brendan O'Neill confesses "to loathe the *Alison Lapper Pregnant* statue (not Alison Lapper herself, please note, who I'm sure has overcome great challenges to become both an artist and a mother)." For O'Neill, "the statue captures much of what is rotten in the heart of new Britain. . . . *Alison Lapper Pregnant* is about as challenging as old underwear. . . . It shows that we value people for what they are rather than what they achieve. . . . We prefer victims to heroes" (fig. 17).

As much as these commentators try to achieve the focus on the artwork apparently required by aesthetic judgment, they end by remarking not so much on the artistic properties of the statue as on the details of Lapper's disability. Lapper's physical features—and not necessarily those represented in the statue—become reasons for denying the status of the work as art. The commentators also attack Lapper's personality as psychopathological, although it is not clear what Lapper herself has to do with the artwork.[12] More important, the commentaries conclude in nearly every case that the alliance between modern art and disability provides evidence that the art world in general is in decline, rotten, inhuman, or sick. The appearance of disability somehow justifies the claim that the project of modern art is diseased.

But modern art permits no such condemnation of disability. I have been arguing that modern art makes of disability one of its defining aesthetic principles, rendering it impossible to attack disability without also rejecting modern art. The Nazis, of course, epitomize this last response. They attack the modern in art as disability and, consequently, reject all modern art as sick. The controversy over *Alison Lapper Pregnant* reinforces a similar dilemma, compelling beholders, whether friendly or not to modern art, to confront human disqualification as a facet of aesthetic

Figure 17. "Pigeon Toes," *Alison Lapper Pregnant* by Marc Quinn, "Statue of Limitations," *The Guardian,* May 17, 2007

judgment. Their choice is either to reject artworks that picture disabled people or to embrace disability as an aesthetic value in itself.

Many beholders choose to reject disability, but what would the other choice involve? "If the Venus de Milo had arms," Quinn observes, "it would most probably be a very boring statue" (4). Quinn's work trades in the bewildering idea that the same properties that strengthen works of art disqualify the actual people who possess them—the same bewildering idea on which modern art establishes itself. Modern art discovers in the eye drawn to the difference of disability one of its defining aesthetic principles. The interviews included in the catalog of *The Complete Marbles* insist again and again on this idea. Quinn repeatedly asks the subjects of his sculptures what they think about fragmentary classical statuary, whether it is beautiful and, if yes, whether their bodies are therefore beautiful as well. Lapper poses the same question: "Why shouldn't my body be considered art?" (Freeman). The crucial point here is to recognize that Lapper's body, once turned into an aesthetic representation, has a better chance of being accepted as art than a nondisabled body, despite the fact that disabled bodies, outside of aesthetic contexts, are still dismissed as repulsive and ugly. Disability is not merely unwanted content, political or otherwise, introduced into art but a mode of appearance that grows increasingly identifiable over time as the aesthetic itself.

Anita Silvers argues that modern art, because of its preoccupation with corporeal deformation, represents a moral resource for teaching people to accept disabled bodies as beautiful rather than rejecting them as ugly. She notices that people find beautiful Picasso's cubist portrait,

Maya with a Doll, while simultaneously being repulsed by a real child whose osteogenesis imperfecta produces the same features. The solution is, she argues, to embrace an aesthetic point of view in our everyday life, to tutor ourselves to look at disabled people as if they were works of art. I have no objection if modern art helps people to see disability as beautiful, although I am dubious about the possibility, but I am proposing a different dynamic between disability in art and reality. It is not a matter of being able to view disabled people as representing works of art; it is a matter of being able to view works of art as representing disability.[13] This fine distinction is important because it underscores that the difference ascribed to the artwork relies on the difference of disability, and as long as it remains unacknowledged, disability can be used to disqualify and oppress human beings. The distinction itself between disability in art and in reality is a function of the aesthetics of human disqualification.

Medical Photographs: The Art of Making Strange. The Mütter Museum of Philadelphia shows medical specimens, artifacts, and photographs to 80,000 people annually—exhibits called "disturbingly informative" on its website. The crowds streaming through the museum are not subjected to explicit captions and signs about degeneracy, as were the people who visited the Entartete Kunst exhibition, but the human subjects viewed by these crowds bear the weight nevertheless of an aesthetics of human disqualification that uses disability to represent some human beings as inferior to others. The Mütter Museum, conceived in 1849, ten years after the invention of the photograph, seems at first glance to be an archaic survival from a time before it became inappropriate to look at disabled people for education, fun, and profit. But in January 2008 *Newsweek* magazine published a visual essay that gives the lie to this theory. The essay reproduces ten sample images from the nearly 200 photographs published in the new catalog, *Mütter Museum: Historic Medical Photographs,* apparently for the distinct purpose of presenting disabled people as objects of visual pleasure. Unlike the catalog, which avoids the sensational language of medical marvels and monsters associated historically with the museum, *Newsweek* seems deliberately to mine the shock value of the medical photographs, calling its selection, in an apparent desire to rehabilitate the freak show for the modern moment, "A Century of Medical Oddities."

There may be no better example with which to think about the aesthetics of human disqualification than the medical photograph. The medical photograph is its own aesthetic genre, an aesthetic genre determined not to be seen as one. It obeys a number of aesthetic rules, such as the use of full body profiles, changing postures, serial shots of the same subject, comparative anatomy between subjects, and close-ups, but its primary aesthetic imperative is the pretense of objectivity for the purpose of medical understanding and diagnosis. The images exist, after all, not to give pleasure but to instruct. Medical photographs cast disability as reality, not art, because their disabled subjects are exhibited first and foremost as medical specimens—examples of natural history gone bad and preserved for the advancement of science. No person in a medical photograph is a picture of health—all of which is to say that medical photographs represent medical subjects: the sick, the disabled, the injured, the deformed, those supposedly in need of a cure. The explicit ideology behind medical photographs is to promote a healthy world in which medical photography would no longer be necessary or possible as a genre, for once medical science prevails, a golden age will be upon us, and medical subjects will be gone forever.[14]

Until that glorious day arrives, however, people thought in need of medical rescue will be found among us. Who are they and what do they look like? What happens when doctors take their photographs and they are collected in museums, archives, and magazines? The *Newsweek* selection runs the gamut from giants and dwarfs, persons affected by polio, tuberculosis, facial deformities to parasitic insects, x-rays of objects stuck in throats, and a skeleton of conjoined twins, creating a collection, like most medical collections, in which it is not always clear why any given person might be classified as a human oddity. The problem, of course, is the instability of disability as an identity. All people, by virtue of being human, move in and out of disability identity, and people recognized as disabled in one context may not be thought disabled in another. In fact, the aesthetics of human disqualification works comparatively. Because the baseline in medicine is perfect health, medical photographs may enfreak any deviation from the baseline, however slight. Human disqualification viewed in isolation, based on individual appearance, has little meaning; its meaning emerges by association, placement in context, and aesthetic technique.

The Russian formalists define art itself as aesthetic technique, most notably as the technique of making strange. *Ostranenie* represents for

them a process of "defamiliarization" by which the familiar is cast as unfamiliar and surprising (Shklovsky). Picasso's cubist faces present superb examples, but making strange and disability are not so easily distinguished, especially because modern art relies with increasing frequency in its history on the semblance of disability to produce aesthetic effects.[15] The Russian formalists do not mention medical images as examples of defamiliarization, but the medical photograph offers, in fact, a remarkable vision of the art of making strange. The ability to represent a person as a medical oddity often relies on the technique of the photograph itself, on its ability to shift an appearance, create an association, or elicit a context that disqualifies the medical subject as inferior.

The art of making strange, annexed to the conventions of the freak show, is on vivid display in the *Newsweek* essay from its very first page. We also see on display the use of medical photographs to disqualify their subjects. The essay opens under the pall of a double death head, accentuating with a close-up view the malevolent associations of the two skulls of a pair of conjoined twins and juxtaposing them with the essay's title reference to medical oddities. The essay closes with the same image in smaller scale but describes the twins in medical terms as a case of "ectopagus" (fig. 18).[16] Beginning at least with Chang and Eng Bunker, some of whose remains are housed in the Mütter Museum, freak shows and carnivals have profited from the American love affair with conjoined twins (Wu). More than any other, this image makes it absolutely clear that the *Newsweek* essay conceives itself as a continuation of the freak-show tradition and its exhibition for fun and profit of people deemed inferior.

At least three other photographs send the same message about the freak show to *Newsweek* readers. The second image uses a sideshow convention to defamiliarize and enfreak its subjects, lining up in a row four men of varying statures from too small to too tall (fig. 19). The caption explains that Henry Mullins "was nearly seven feet seven inches tall, weighed 280 pounds, and performed on stage and in the movies," but *Newsweek* leaves unnamed the person of smallest stature and those in the middle ranges, although their names are written on the photograph. Another example reveals that captions invent contexts that make medical subjects seem strange. The fourth image shows a wax model of Madame Dimanche before she experienced "one of the most unusual surgeries in history." The Parisian "sprouted" from her forehead at age seventy-six a

Figure 18. Ectopagus (laterally conjoined) dicephalus dibrachius tripus twins. From Part IV of the collection of pictures of congenital abnormalities that form the basis of the four-volume atlas *Human Monstrosities*, by Barton Cooke Hirst (1861–1935) and George Arthur Piersol (1856–1924), published 1891–93. Photograph opaqued for reproduction. Donor: Dr. B. C. Hirst. Reproduced in "A Century of Medical Oddities," *Newsweek*, January 7, 2008.

Figure 19. Stanley Rosinski, Tommy Lowe, Dr. Charles D. Humberd, and Henry M. Mullins (1915–?), photographed December 30, 1939, from an album of photographs and newspaper clippings of giants and acromegalic cases compiled 1942 by Dr. Joseph McFarland. Henry M. Mullins measured 7′6 3/4″ and weighed 280 pounds. Humberd reported of Mullins, who had been on the stage and in movies (*The Sideshow Mystery*, 1932), "It is indeed amazing to watch so vast a personage doing a whirlwind acrobatic act. . . . He dances, fast and furiously, and engages in a comedy knock-about 'business' that would be found strenuous by any trained 'Physical culturist.' . . . He is alert, intelligent, well read, affable and friendly." Reproduced in "A Century of Medical Oddities," *Newsweek*, January 7, 2008.

"horn" that grew to almost ten inches before it was surgically removed six years later by one Dr. Joseph Souberbeille. The image contains a black wax model of Madame Dimanche mounted on a board and photographed in profile to show the growth hanging down over her face (fig. 20). Finally, the sixth image offers an example of cultural and racial difference positioned as medical oddity (fig. 21). It exhibits the left hand of a Chinese nobleman, having cropped out of full view the person to focus on his extraordinary features: twisted fingernails ranging from five to six and a half inches in length.

Based on context alone, almost any image that finds itself in a collection of medical photographs will surrender its vision of human variation to the representation of medical deviance. But there are cases in which *Newsweek* seems to reach the limits of medical defamiliarization. The limit cases are important because they disabuse beholders of their inclination to accept the idea that all subjects of medical photographs deviate naturally, in and of themselves, from medical norms, while at the same time questioning the norms being imposed to create the category of oddity. The third image pictures an x-ray of a dog, "but not a real one," caught in the throat of a little girl (fig. 22). The photograph reveals the "toy pooch," nose down, against the backdrop of the girl's throat, lung cavity, and rib cage, producing a study in abstraction, save for the black profile of the toy. The caption explains that the photograph comes from a collection of "radiographs depicting items that were successfully removed from the throats and airways of patients by a pioneering specialist." Aside from the suggestion of injury to the girl, quickly dismissed, the image seems to appear uniquely on the basis of its aesthetic qualities—a perfect example of making strange by photographic technique—for it displays no suggestion of biological oddity.

The eighth image, depicting a young boy affected by polio, uses typical conventions of the medical photograph, making sure to place on view the entire specimen. Nevertheless, there are no signs of physical deformation, as found in the other photographs of human subjects, and except for the wary look on the boy's face, the only indication of things gone awry is the primitive steel brace attached to the orthopedic shoe on his right leg (fig. 23). The justification for including the photograph among a century of medical oddities is apparently that polio, "which struck Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1920s, is now almost unheard of in the United States."

Figure 20. Wax model of Madame Dimanche, or Widow Sunday, who lived in Paris around the beginning of the nineteenth century. The horn on her forehead attained a length of 9.8 inches by her eighty-second year, having begun to form six years earlier. It was successfully removed by Dr. Joseph Souberbeille (1754–1846), a noted French surgeon. Models such as this one of Madame Dimanche are known to have been in a number of American medical and popular anatomic museums by the mid-nineteenth century. At present no model other than the one at the Mütter Museum (different from that pictured here and part of the original collection of Dr. Mütter) is known to exist. Photograph by James F. Wood, ca. 1892–1900, from the album of photographs by Wood presented to the Mütter Museum in 1898. Reproduced in "A Century of Medical Oddities," *Newsweek,* January 7, 2008.

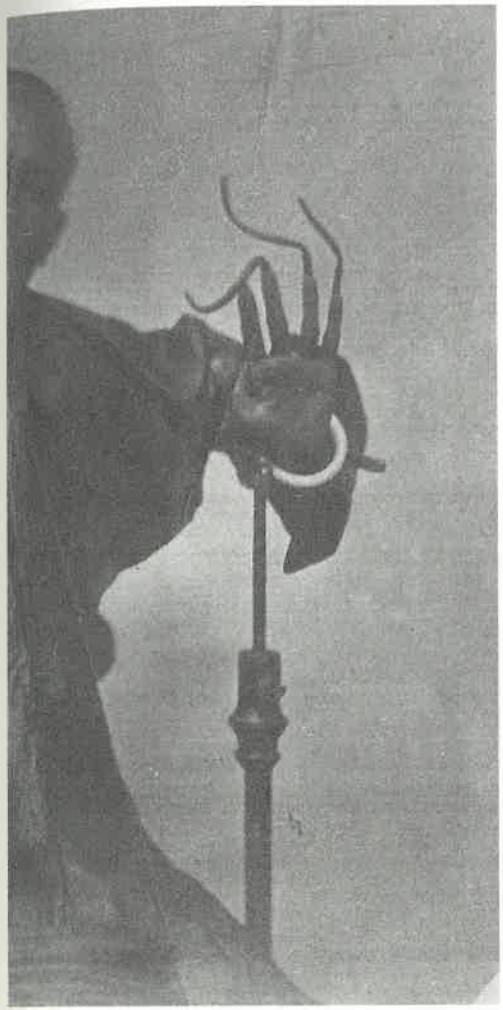

Figure 21. Photograph, second and third fingernails 6½ inches; fourth 5 inches. From an album by John Glasgow Kerr, M.D. (1824–1901), of photographs of his practice in Canton, China. Fingernails were grown very long among some of the elite in China as a symbol of their high social standing. Reproduced in "A Century of Medical Oddities," *Newsweek,* January 7, 2008.

Given the panic surrounding polio in the United States during the twentieth century, it is not surprising that its disappearance would be celebrated, but the photograph itself does not seem to bear witness to the polio panic. Rather, the small-featured boy in a crew cut invokes gentleness and innocence rather than strangeness, his status as a human oddity being established by a huge backstory and the steel prosthesis bound to him.

Finally, the ninth image seems to break with the conventions of the medical photograph by exhibiting a mange mite magnified in size by 150

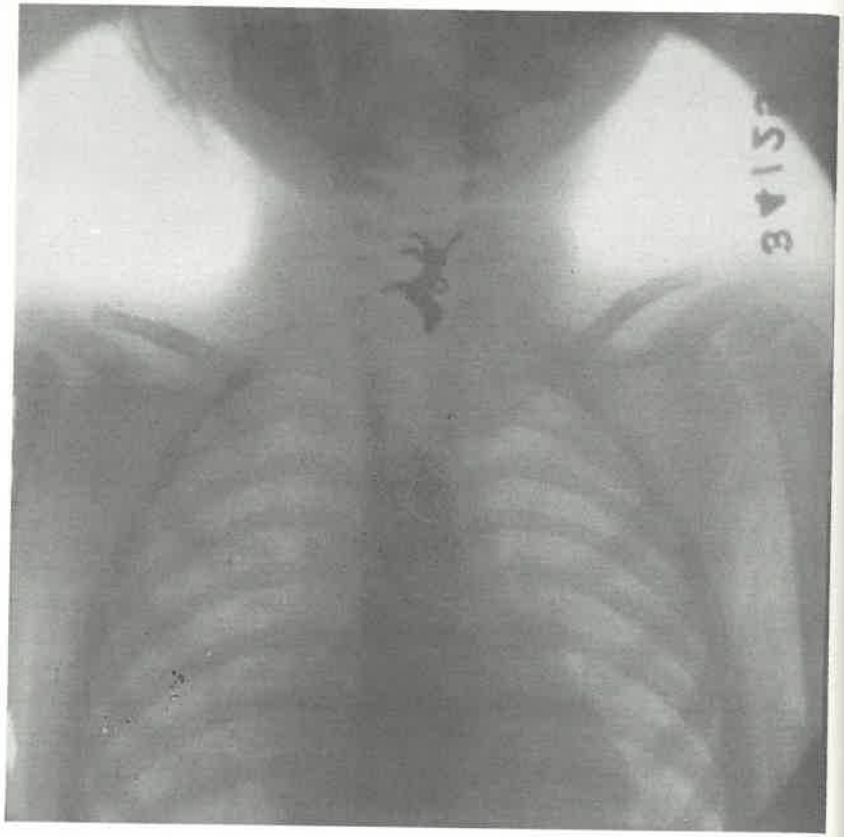

Figure 22. Skiagraph (radiograph) from the Dr. Chevalier Jackson (1865–1958) collection of foreign bodies removed from the throats and airways of patients by pioneer bronchoesophagologist Jackson and his colleagues. Toy dog in esophagus. Anna Zurawinski, age three. Radiograph by Dr. Willis F. Manges, February 28, 1919. Dr. Jackson presented his collection of swallowed objects to the Mütter Museum in 1924. Reproduced in "A Century of Medical Oddities," *Newsweek*, January 7, 2008.

diameters—a species still in existence that preys on horses (fig. 24). The only apparent reason for the insect's inclusion in the collection is to display medical technology, although the magnification renders the *sarcoptes equi* monstrous ("Don't worry, that's not the actual size," the caption reassures), and the allusion to disease is not far away. The "parasitic mite," the caption elaborates, "lives within the subcutaneous tissue of a horse," causing "scabies, a transmittable, itchy skin infection that riders can pick

Figure 23. Infantile paralysis (polio) after operation, with apparatus (leg brace). Photograph by J. Rennie Smith, Newark and Asbury Park, New Jersey, ca. 1880s. Donor: Dr. DeForest Willard (1846–1910). Reproduced in "A Century of Medical Oddities," *Newsweek*, January 7, 2008.

Figure 24. Photomicrograph, female itch insect of horse (*Sarcoptes equi*), magnified 150 diameters. Photograph by Brevet Major Edward Curtis (1838–1912), by order of Surgeon General Joseph Janvier Woodward (1833–1884) for the Army Medical Museum, ca. 1865–67. Reproduced in "A Century of Medical Oddities," *Newsweek*, January 7, 2008.

up from a horse." But the appearance of the insect does expose in part the rationale underlying medical photography. The medical model of disability, which lodges defect in the person rather than in the person's social environment, disqualifies the unhealthy and diseased as inferior people, and they are easily grouped with other species thought inferior, such as animals and insects.[17] As the final photograph in the series, the parasitic mite calls for an insidious and retroactive reading of the previous images of disabled people as examples of beings existing at the lower end of the evolutionary chain, beings whose appearance is thought strange, beings therefore labeled oddities.

While the riddle of modern art is how to recognize the disability in art, the riddle of the medical photograph is how to recognize the art in disability. The aesthetics of human disqualification narrows both recognitions, asking beholders to dismiss art that shows too many signs of disability and to close their eyes to the artistic techniques used by medical photographers to disqualify their subjects. The perspective that sees in both cases the aesthetic value of disability is hard to find. Neither missing point of view will be possible in a large way until we find the motivation to represent disability aesthetically as a qualified rather than disqualified subject.

Coda

In February 1998 *New York Press* published an essay by Norah Vincent that attacks the emerging discipline of disability studies as "yet another academic fad" (40). Nevertheless, disability studies apparently fails as a discipline not because it is too chic but because it attracts incompetent, weak, and dishonest people. Camille Paglia calls disability studies "the last refuge for pc scoundrels" (40), but if we believe Vincent, disability studies is also a refuge for ordinary scoundrels, not to mention scholars and students of poor quality. Disability studies supposedly attracts people of questionable moral character—"academic careerists" and "ambulance-chasing publishers" who want to profit from the newest fad—as well as mediocre and flawed minds—the "victim-obsessed," the "second-rate," and the psychologically dependent (40). Vincent seems especially keen to discredit disability studies by associating it with intellectually inferior

Figure 25. Gary Leib, "Disability Chic," *New York Press,* February 2–11, 1998

and psychologically damaged scholars, and when she interviews various leading lights in the field, she is more intent on exposing their psychological weak spots than on capturing what is original about their contribution to disability studies. Lennard Davis, Vincent tells us, melts into "self-righteous goodspeak" at the mere mention of disability, while Michael Bérubé speaks in a voice that is "silky and kind" when he argues that disability is an idea necessary to understand human rights (40). Disability studies deserves no place in the university, it seems, and no self-respecting scholar should have anything to do with it.

If there is any doubt that Vincent wants to disqualify disabled people as physically defective, morally degenerate, or psychologically damaged, the cartoon accompanying the essay should make her purpose obvious. The cartoon, drawn by Gary Leib, pictures a man in a wheelchair being pushed by a woman in a nurse's uniform (fig. 25). Leib overlays the drawing with a variety of disqualifying aesthetic markers: some associate the disabled with physical ugliness and lack of intelligence, while others attempt to promote the idea, despite all evidence to the contrary, that the disabled enjoy a privileged, exclusive, and wealthy lifestyle. For example, as beads of sweat run down his face, the disabled man in the wheelchair grips a cigarette holder in his mangled teeth and toasts his public with a martini. Behind him and pushing the wheelchair is his nurse attendant. Her eyes are vapid, and her breasts are bursting out of her tight-fitting uniform. Most hateful, however, is the fact that Leib draws the cartoon in a way that re-envisions people with disabilities as Nazi soldiers. The

disabled man in the wheelchair wears a monocle, summoning the image of an SS officer. The message of the cartoon is shocking and direct in its attack on disabled people; it manages to represent the disabled as poor, inferior, and undeserving creatures who have managed somehow to attain a position of wealth and power superior to other people. The cartoon asks its beholders to believe that the disabled as a group belong to the privileged few, to a dominant class, and to an infamous story of genocide and military expansionism, deserving comparison with the Nazis, some of the greatest criminals in human history.

By way of conclusion, let me pose three questions that I do not intend to answer but offer as background music to Gary Leib's cartoon and other artworks used to disqualify people with disabilities. What would it mean to call a person sick without it being a disqualification? What would it mean to call an artwork sick without it being a disqualification? What is the relationship between these two questions? Applying the aesthetics of human disqualification according to business as usual will give no satisfying answers to these questions. Rather, the way forward requires nothing less than a radical rethinking of the relationship between aesthetics, disqualification, and oppression, one in which the systemic oppression of disabled people would fail, and fail precisely, because it could no longer be based on human appearances, features, and conditions deemed inferior.

Chapter 3

What Can Disability Studies Learn from the Culture Wars?

My concern in this chapter is threefold. First, I will be arguing that disability is a significant register in the many and various disputes that have come to be known as the American "culture wars." The culture wars are not only about what culture will mean in the future but also about who deserves to be included in a specific culture, and the determining factor in these political decisions depends often on being able to display a healthy body and mind. Statements that label cultural attitudes, minority groups, lifestyles, and works of art as "healthy" or "sick" are not metaphors but aesthetic judgments about the physical and mental condition of citizens. My general purpose here is to rethink the culture wars from the point of view of disability studies, a revision that entails not only a critique of the reliance of cultural and aesthetic ideals on the healthy and able body but an appreciation of alternative forms of value and beauty based on disability.

Second, I want to suggest that a political unconscious represses the role of disability in cultural and aesthetic representation. This issue is by necessity related to my first concern. Fredric Jameson argues that the experience of human community functions as a "political unconscious" that represents the "absolute horizon" of all interpretation (17).[1] The political unconscious, he concludes, determines the symbolism by which the forms of aesthetic objects are given as representations of community, but what has not been considered is whether the political unconscious may also