Deconstruction or Reinforcement? How Modernist Disability Aesthetics Did or Did Not Challenge Historical Normates

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the recurring presence of disability as a trope in modernist art and evaluates whether this presence challenged or reinforced societal conceptions of disability. Drawing on Critical Disability Studies, it analyzes how these artistic tropes, from the Vitruvian Man as an early manifestation of the "normate" as coined by Garland-Thomson to modernist disability aesthetics, have shaped representations of normative and disabled bodies across visual arts, literature, music (Straus, 2018), and medical and technological disciplines. The paper explores how modernism marked a turning point, with avant-garde movements incorporating Disability Aesthetics – a framework celebrating bodily diversity and disrupting normative ideals. This paper argues that contemporary Disability Justice artists, such as Carmen Papalia, Nomy Lamm, and Chun-Shan (Sandie) Yi, extend this aesthetics by prioritizing lived experiences and advocating for Crip beauty as a site of resistance. By comparing modernist tropes with contemporary practices, this paper underscores the importance of situating disability aesthetics within their social and historical contexts. It concludes by proposing a framework to analyze the legacy of modernist art for today's Disability Justice movements, emphasizing the need to balance historical continuity with critical awareness of systemic differences.

1. Introduction

Modern Art revolutionized the representational and naturalist aesthetic regime that preceded it by breaking norms, exploring novel perspectives, and representing human bodies previously excluded from public visibility and artistic presence. From Picasso and Braque's Cubism to Abstract Expressionism, these movements shared a common thread: a challenge to conventional artistic forms and the cultural values underpinning them. This paper examines the recurring

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presence of disability as a trope within these practices, analyzing whether it challenged or reinforced societal conceptions of disability. Employing a revisionist lens grounded in Critical Disability Studies, it seeks to critically assess the extent to which these representations subverted or upheld prevailing norms and prejudices.

To establish this analysis, the paper begins by providing pragmatic definitions of key concepts linking modernist art, disability aesthetics, and contemporary Disability Justice artistic practices. Drawing from foundational scholarship, it revisits the construct of the "normate," a figure epitomizing societal ideals of normalcy and beauty, as first articulated in the Vitruvian Man (Hamraie 2017; Garland-Thomson 1997, 2009). This construct serves as a biopolitical paradigm, demarcating the boundaries between normalcy and otherness (Mitchell & Snyder 2001), shaping representations across visual arts, literature, music (Straus 2018), and medical and technological disciplines.

Modernist movements offered a potential rupture from these disciplinary norms. Scholars like Tobin Siebers and Amanda Cachia identify the emergence of Disability Aesthetics during this period, defined as a representational framework that celebrates bodily diversity and challenges traditional ideals of harmony, wholeness, and beauty (Siebers 2010; Cachia 2020). By exploring these connections, this paper evaluates the transformative potential of modernist disability tropes and their impact on entrenched conceptions of disability.
The analysis does not aim to celebrate the mere presence of disability in modernist art but critically examines its implications. After contextualizing the historical significance of these tropes, the paper turns to contemporary Disability Justice-informed artistic practices. Artists such as Carmen Papalia, Nomy Lamm, and Chun-Shan (Sandie) Yi extend modernist legacies by reimagining disability aesthetics from a first-person perspective that celebrates Crip beauty and joy as forms of resistance (Berne et al. 2019). These practices foreground the lived experiences of Disabled bodyminds and advocate for social changes that disrupt the exclusivity of normative beauty standards.

Finally, the paper highlights the critical differences between the organizational and representational modes of modernist "-isms" and contemporary Disability Justice movements. These differences—in methods of production, distribution, and social engagement—underscore the necessity of regulating the proximities and distances between historical and contemporary frameworks. The concluding section proposes a pragmatic tool for critically appropriating modernist tropes within contemporary disability aesthetics, ensuring that such

appropriations remain attuned to the distinct contexts and aims of these movements.

1. Preliminary definitions for a Critical Disability Studies framework

One of the main difficulties when examining the complex interconnections between Modernist artistic movements and disability is the evasiveness and broadness that both categories have, which make it tricky to provide an exhaustive definition with a set of necessary and sufficient conditions that enable us to establish a class of objects we can categorize as modernist art, and as a disability. For this reason, and with the practical objective of characterizing a provisional class that helps us build bridges between disability and Modernisms, we will rather sketch a provisional agreement upon what we understand as Modernisms and as disability, as well as a set of crucial terms of their common semantic field, which are the notions of the medical industrial complex, complex embodiment, the normate, and Disability Aesthetics.

Modernism, as an artistic movement, is vast and multifaceted, spanning diverse temporal and geographical contexts. To anchor this analysis, we adopt Alfred Barr's influential diagrams (Elligott 2006: 77), which position Cubism as the genesis of Modern Art and identify 1907—marked by Pablo Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*—as a pivotal moment. This choice is not arbitrary but reflects this work′s profound rupture within Western aesthetic traditions. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* disrupted the classical ideals of perspective and harmony, introducing fragmented forms and provocative subject matter that redefined how the human body could be represented. It also challenged entrenched norms of beauty and wholeness, laying the groundwork for Disability Aesthetics by questioning the very standards defining bodily integrity.

Similarly, the endpoint of our framework, American Abstract Expressionism, encapsulates the post-World War II crisis of representation, where the fragmentation and abstraction of form echoed the social and physical disruptions of the era. This period's iconoclastic tendencies resonate with Disability Aesthetics, which similarly seeks to dismantle normative visual paradigms. By delimiting the temporal scope from Cubism to Abstract Expressionism, this pragmatic definition allows us to focus on a coherent lineage of artistic practices that are particularly relevant to the intersections of Modernism and disability.

Moving on to the characterization of disability, the term 'disability' serves as an umbrella concept that contrasts with a normative ideal of physical

capability, mental ability, or sanity. Disability can thus be understood as a condition attributed to a bodymind[1]—an integrated whole of body and mind—that diverges from socially constructed norms of normalcy due to perceived differences. As Garland-Thomson explains, disability represents "a pervasive cultural system that stigmatizes certain kinds of bodily variations" (1997: 76). This perspective bridges the divide between the medical and social models of disability, both of which offer reductive, polarized views.

The medical model defines disability solely in terms of physical or mental impairments, claiming an objective scientific authority often rooted in diagnosis. This model follows historical patterns established by earlier religious and magical explanations of disability, which categorized disabled individuals as saintly or monstrous beings requiring exclusion or eradication. The early twentieth century saw the medical model rise to dominance, coinciding with an influx of disabled individuals in European urban centers after World War I. This period marked an intense societal focus on rehabilitation and cure, paralleling the emergence of the first Modernist avant-garde movements.

In contrast, the social model of disability distinguishes between physical or mental impairments and the disabling conditions imposed by societal structures. It argues that barriers and stigmas, not the impairments themselves, are the primary sources of harm and marginalization. These barriers often limit independence, autonomy, and self-determination in crucial areas such as personal relationships and living conditions. Accordingly, the social model emphasizes societal transformation over medicalization or institutionalization as the means to improve the lives of disabled individuals.[2]

Despite ongoing debates and the insights of Critical Disability Studies, the medical model's influence persists throughout the Medical Industrial Com-

[1] I adopt the term 'body-minds' to emphasize a non-dualist conception of individuals that does not separate body and mind, as Cartesian anthropology does. Moreover, I believe 'bodymind' is successful in making more explicit the embodiment of individuals as organisms than other more abstract terms ('individual', 'person'). In doing so, I follow the lead of Feminist Disability Studies and Feminist Crip Theory scholars Eli Clare (2017), Alison Kafer (2013), and Sami Schalk (2018).

[2] It is worth noting the difference in terms of self-determination and self-awareness between the medical and the social model of disability. While the birth of the medical model is oblivious of its own contextual and historical contingency, the social model is postulated intentionally as a theoretical effort to counterbalance the hegemony of the medical authority over the lived experience of disability.

plex. As Mia Mingus describes, this complex extends beyond healthcare to intersect with eugenics, capitalism, colonization, war, prisons, and reproductive oppression (2015). Its authority underpins diverse practices, including assistive technologies, state-regulated services, forced medicalization, psychiatric institutionalization, sterilization, and the use of prosthetics. This pervasive network underscores the need for a definition of disability that incorporates systemic social factors as fundamental components.

Rather than adhering strictly to one model, this analysis adopts a middle-ground perspective that frames disability as "a culturally stigmatized bodily difference" (Straus 2018: 5). This approach acknowledges both the significant role of social stigma and the material, embodied experiences of difference. Aligned with Tobin Siebers' theory of complex embodiment (2006, 2008), this framework highlights the reciprocal relationship between social representations and lived bodily realities. Siebers establishes how

> the economy between social representations and the body [is] not as unidirectional as in the social model, or nonexistent as in the medical model, but as reciprocal. Complex embodiment theorizes the body and its representations as mutually transformative. Social representations obviously affect the experience of the body. (2008: 25)

This definition can connect complex embodiment to the concept of the normate, which is central in Critical Disabilities Studies. The normate, coined by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, designates precisely the social representations of the body that are deemed acceptable, correct, and even desirable. The normate, then, designates a representational figure that depicts those human beings who are whole, and at the same time is imbued with a normative dimension that draws the line between the human and the less-than-human. For this reason, the normate is a very concrete power device that reinforces the power relations established by an ableist system – as Joel Michael Reynolds points out, the normate "is the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them" (2019: 244), namely, that of deeming which bodyminds are valid and which ones are not, the line between able or disabled, which enables mechanisms of social eugenics and segregation.

Against the hegemonic and disciplinarian normalcy[3] dictated by the normate as a paradigm that determines the value of artistic representations, Disability Aesthetics offers an alternative paradigm that embraces elements previously considered deficits as aesthetic virtues - such as disfiguration, fracture, fragmentation, or disability. As Tobin Siebers argues, 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. (2010: 133)

Siebers identifies in Modern Art a deep bundle with disability in their representation of a variety of human shapes, representation of injury, trauma, and madness, especially in the artistic expressions of flesh after World War I. These representations, Siebers continues, "turn traditional conceptions of aesthetic beauty away from ideas of the natural and healthy body" (2010: 134).

2. Historical Normates as Prescriptive Paradigms

To understand how Siebers argues that Modern Art embraced Disability Aesthetics in opposition to the historical normate at the beginning of the 20th century, it is crucial to examine how the normate operates as a figure and how artistic expressions can counterbalance or challenge it. This paper conceptualizes the normate as functioning within the framework of paradigms, as defined by Giorgio Agamben. According to Agamben, a paradigm is "a form of knowledge neither inductive nor deductive, but rather analogical, that moves from singularity to singularity" (2008: 7, my translation). This paradigm model allows for intersections across time, moving beyond strict dichotomies. Agamben further explains that paradigms are both defined by and define their sets:

> The epistemological status of the paradigm becomes evident only if ... it is grasped that it challenges the dichotomic opposition between the particular and the universal that we are used to consider as inseparable from the cognitive processes and it presents us a singularity that is irreducible to neither of the two terms of the dichotomy. The regime of the discourse is not logic, but analogy

[3] For an analysis of the connection between Foucault's notion of discipline and biopolitics, and the normative power structures of disability, see Shelley Tremain's edited volume, *Foucault and the Government of Disability* (2008).

(2008: 7, my translation).

From this perspective, historical normates can be revisited as paradigms – singularities that, rather than embodying universal norms, exist within a continuum between the universal and the particular. This understanding disrupts binary thinking and frames normates as constructs with prescriptive power tied to specific cultural and historical contexts. However, the normate as a paradigm simultaneously presents itself as a universal norm. This duality reinforces its disciplinary authority, as Aimi Hamraie describes in *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability*:

> A universal body has served as a template for the architectural user for centuries. This 'mythic average norm' is not a neutral body but rather a particular white, European, nondisabled, youthful, and often masculine figure whose features remain unmarked [...] Disability studies scholars and historians of science have argued that the concepts of 'normal' and 'average' are relatively recent phenomena, appearing in the nineteenth century with the birth of statistics to produce modern forms of power. As Lennard Davis concludes, the norm has a prescriptive function, which stems from its reference to real population data, unlike the earlier, classical notion of the 'ideal' body, which referenced mythic figures divine in form. For Davis, this is what makes the figure of the norm insidious: when norms purport to represent 'real' populations, it becomes possible to attempt to align those populations with the average, consequently making normates appear as natural or neutral [...] In shaping the 'real' population, norms become prescriptions for normalcy. (2017: 20)

This universalizing mechanism links normates across history, from Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* to Le Corbusier's *Modulor*. These paradigms, although varied in form, share a common function: to establish and enforce norms that demarcate valid and invalid bodyminds. This prescriptive power extends beyond epistemological implications to justify social exclusion, segregation, and systemic violence against bodies deemed invalid.

While Hamraie's analysis focuses on architecture and science, the prescriptive effects of normates are evident in artistic and cultural representations, from literature to the plastic arts. As Mitchell and Snyder observe, narratives of normalcy rely on the impaired body as a dialectical foil, generating a sense of perfection through contrast (2001). In this way, impairment functions as a 'prosthesis' or 'crutch' for the construction of normative able-bodiedness. Ironically, the very impairments that sustain normative ideals are erased or stigmatized, reducing impaired bodyminds to interchangeable objects of otherness. As

Val Plumwood argues, this reduction facilitates the "instrumentalization and commodification" of marginalized groups, perpetuating systemic oppression (Plumwood, 2003: 54).

3. The relevance of visual representations of disability in complex embodiment

When assessing the prescriptive weight of the normate as a paradigm, it is worth considering the relevance of visual representations of this figure. The politics of representation behind these manifestations are analogous to the ones shaping what Rancière calls the *regime of visuality* of the public stage (2000), that is, who gets to appear and have a voice in the political space of social order. Moreover, according to the economy established in complex embodiment, the visual representations of disability often determine its social understanding, which affects the lived experience of disability (Siebers 2008: 25). In other words, social stereotypes and common places that pre-inform expectations and ideas about people with disabilities are often reinforced and informed by visual culture – from the plastic arts to photography, to new media like series and films. These visual tropes help to draw the line between what is hegemonically considered normal and even beautiful, and what remains outside of normalcy and is deemed as other. These representations are relevant insofar, as Brick Johnstone puts it, the imaginaries and depictions of people with disabilities "provide a context for how they were perceived at that time (eg, worthy of derision or sympathy, objects of ridicule, deserving of divine punishment, etc)", and especially in times when the majority of the population was illiterate, "many individuals learned social expectations for how to treat the disabled by viewing paintings in churches or watching plays during community festivals" (2021: 4).

It is against and in response to this hegemony that alternative images and representations of disability can be constructed. Taking into account how hegemonic representations are derived from a violent ableist regime, we can understand social imaginaries that offer *other* perspectives on disability as a critique of violence. Here, it is useful to invoke Marina Calloni, who takes the Gramscian idea of counter-hegemony as a constructive tool to develop non-violent cultures. As Calloni argues:

> If we want to fight capitalist oppression, it is necessary to understand not only its techniques and contradictions, but also the role that culture, repressive

> imaginaries and myths play in maintaining processes that not only permit a persistent reproduction of capitalism, but also the socio-cultural reproduction of differentiated forms of symbolic and structural, horizontal and vertical violence. (2024: 175)

Calloni's vindication of the need for an imaginary counter-hegemony that interrupts the reproduction of capitalism through representation can be transferred into the necessity of counter-hegemonic representations of disability that contest ableist imaginaries. We must take into account the reduced scope of representations of disability existing before Modernity, which was limited to tropes that reproduced social bias such as people with physical disabilities depicted as beggars, criminalized by 'ugly laws' or spectacularized in freak shows since the mid-16th century (Barth 2001); or mental illness represented as spiritual disorders and demonic possession. Finally, sensory disability is connected to tropes that either demonize or sacralize it. An example of the latter is the depiction of blind people as seers with out-of-this-world wisdom – like the depiction of Tiresias, the Greek mythological blind prophet who revealed the gods' secrets. Given the dominance of this narrow scope of representations of disability, introducing diversity among artistic expressions capturing embodiment in Modern Art constitutes a significant shift in the previous regime of visibility that governed how disabled bodyminds could appear in the public space. Previously, disability representations were often found only in medical illustrations and photography, which staged disability in a way that promoted a logic of distancing, diagnosing, and othering. In front of this, disability tropes in Modern Art movements establish it as an aspect of human diversity and as part of human identity that has a strong presence and must be considered when we try to capture the different dimensions of humanity in the arts.

Furthermore, this presence of disabled bodyminds in artistic expression occurs in a way that connects disability with a historical artistic canon, i.e. the lineage of the Masters and the artistic language of Art History, in capitals to denote the Western canon accepted by so-called universal narratives. By doing so, it challenges this precise canon and questions its validity as a narrative of the human – for instance, Surrealist objects often adopt the formal language of the Renaissance and the Baroque, performing variations on classical artistic forms like the bust or the pedestal.

Despite the revolutionary force of this rupture in the politics of representation, the extent to which disability presence in Modern Art deconstructs stigma around disabled bodyminds needs to be critically pondered. Although

disability tropes were introduced, did they really deconstruct social representations of disability as monstrous, shocking, or grotesque? Or did they, on the contrary, merely extend the scope of aesthetic virtues by turning monstrosity and shock into artistic virtues? If so, they would just add new virtues, without really transforming classical ideals of Beauty. In other words, disability would remain other, and *not* beautiful. After presenting how Disability Aesthetics unfolds across Modernism, this critical assessment will present the problems of agency and self-staging we can find in the artistification of disability – which become salient when comparing the ways of making art that structured Modernist movements with more contemporary artistic expressions that aim to resist and dismantle the medical model of disability and the systemic violence against disabled bodyminds.

4. Disability aesthetics and compositional tactics in Modernism

To analyze the interrelation between social representations of disability, the consolidation of the medical model, and the emergence of Disability Aesthetics in Modern Art, it is essential to contextualize these developments within the early 20th-century European landscape. This era witnessed technological advancements and the devastation of World War I, both of which profoundly influenced artistic expressions and societal perceptions of disability. The war produced hypervisible populations of injured veterans, such as the gueules cassées ("broken faces"), whose presence in urban spaces challenged societal norms of bodily integrity and beauty (Alexander 2007). Medical interventions, including prosthetics and reconstructive surgery, simultaneously reinforced the medical model's focus on cure and normalization, perpetuating ableist ideologies.

Amid these societal shifts, Modernist artists responded to prevailing narratives of bodily integrity and normalcy in varied and often contradictory ways. For instance, Anna Coleman Ladd's development of portrait masks for disfigured veterans, celebrated as acts of heroism, also embodied a moral imperative to restore normative appearances. As Howard R. Heydon argued in his essay *The Supremacy of the Spirit*, physical disability was often construed as a spiritual deficiency requiring correction (1918). While Ladd's work aligns with the medical model's valorization of prosthetics, it simultaneously opens questions about the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of such interventions.

In contrast, artistic practices associated with Surrealism resisted the medical model by defamiliarizing and reimagining the human form. The experiences of André Breton and Louis Aragon at the Val-de-Grâce hospital, where

they encountered war-injured and mentally ill patients, informed their commitment to exploring the boundaries of embodiment and perception. Their work destabilized normative representations by embracing fragmentation, fluidity, and dismemberment as aesthetic virtues (Lyford 2007). This approach challenged the normative figure of the normate by proposing alternative paradigms of bodily representation.

Agamben's concept of the paradigm provides a valuable framework for understanding how Modernist Disability Aesthetics operated. As Agamben notes, paradigms traverse the particular and the universal, offering a lens through which singular instances can challenge established norms (2008). Modernist tropes, such as fragmentation and disproportion, function as paradigms that disrupt the prescriptive power of the normate. For example, Hans Bellmer's *La Poupée* (1938-1949) employs dismemberment and assemblage to contest conventional ideals of bodily wholeness, inviting viewers to reconsider their assumptions about beauty and coherence.

Marina Calloni's counter-hegemonic framework further enriches this critique by emphasizing the role of culture in reproducing violence and exclusion through representation. Calloni's insights highlight the need for counter-hegemonic imaginaries that contest ableist tropes and foster more inclusive narratives (2024). By integrating Calloni's perspective, we can critically assess how Modernist Disability Aesthetics both challenged and perpetuated existing power structures. For instance, while Surrealist compositions like Jacques-André Boiffard's *Gros orteil* (1929) subvert normative visual paradigms, they also risk commodifying disability as a spectacle, thereby reinforcing the objectifying gaze.

Juliet Koss provides a compelling lens through which to understand these tactics, particularly in relation to montage and dismemberment. She argues that "formal disjuncture is often aligned with the politics of resistance, the visible montage fragment treated as a marker of the 'real' that questions the logic of representation and thus acts as a destabilizing force in the political, cultural and social realms" (2003: 725). This alignment underscores how Modernist tropes operate not only within artistic frameworks but as active critiques of dominant social structures.

To address these dynamics, the table summarizing compositional tactics offers a concise visual aid, categorizing key tropes – such as disproportion, fragmentation, and ensemble with non-human elements – alongside exemplary

artworks. However, deeper analyses of specific works are necessary to illuminate their critical potential. For instance, the disproportion in Victor Brauner's *Trio* (1937) exemplifies how altered scales can disrupt normative expectations, while Pablo Picasso's *Buste de femme* (1909-1919) demonstrates how fragmented perspectives deconstruct the notion of bodily integrity.

These tactics, while rooted in Modernist movements, possess enduring relevance for contemporary Disability Justice practices. As Amanda Cachia argues, the appropriation of Surrealist tropes by contemporary disabled artists reclaims agency, enabling self-representation that resists objectification (2016). She writes: "Surrealism was based on the fantastical, evocative, and symbolic, whereas these contemporary artists use their own corporeal and conscious bodies to express real body images and experiences that are unique and personal to them" (Cachia, 2016: 144). This reorientation underscores the political significance of compositional tactics as acts of resistance, challenging the hegemonic normate and envisioning new possibilities for embodiment and identity. Overall, the tactics summarized in the table generated a feeling of uncanniness or shock due to their distancing from figures of the normate, which is robust, whole, and symmetric. "Utilizing Surrealist tropes" – Cachia argues – "ultimately empowers disabled people, because they wield agency over how their own bodies are being portrayed, rather than being objectified from a distanced gaze" (2016: 132). The potential of Modern Art movements' imagery to be politicized by contemporary disability arts and culture resides in its potent striking qualities, which can be productively utilized. For instance, Cachia recovers a set of Surrealist strategies that can be used despite its original connection to historical stereotypes of the disabled body as mysterious and strange, due to its versatility as a compositional tactic – for instance, the reorientation of the axis:

> The Surrealists therefore sought to reorganize these axes of orientation in order to provide dynamic new body images. They performed revisionist aesthetics, while also coining new conceptual, physiological links between seemingly quite separate parts of the body. Through innovative new arrangements of the body, the Surrealists pointed out that the human form is not always what it seems. A number of iconic photographs demonstrate that the Surrealists attempted to confuse or abstract body parts in order to make them seem strange and unfamiliar. (2016: 142)

Although using different compositional strategies – like automatism and assemblage in Surrealism, geometrization and synthesis of spatial planes in Cubism, exaggeration of shadows and saturated colors in German Expressionism, and

montage and formal disjuncture in the Bauhaus – the presence of these tropes concerning artistic expressions of different kinds of embodiment constitutes a positioning against the hegemonic normate with a political significance as an act of resistance that should not go unnoticed.

Embodied expression	*Compositional tactic*	*Exemplary artworks*
Disproportion of the whole	Representations of historically marginal subjects	Picasso, *La nana*, 1901
	Oniric metamorphoses of enlarged or reduced sizes	Victor Brauner, *Trio*, 1937
	Distorted perspective, fair mirror, special lenses	Lucien Lorelle, *Le bocal aux trois femmes*, 1946-7
Disproportion of parts	Perspectival enlargement or reduction of a part	Jacques Lipchitz, *Tête*, 1914
	Radical usage of close-ups	Jacques-André Boiffard, *Gros orteil*, 1929
	Biomorphic alteration of body part sizes	Joan Miró, *Tête d'homme*, 1935
Dismemberment and fragmentation	Superposition and analysis of perspectival planes	Pablo Picasso, *Buste de femme*, 1909-19
	Radical close-ups, mirrors, and photographic montage	Herbert Bayer, *Self-portrait*, 1932
	Found object, assemblage	Hans Bellmer, *Les Jeux de la Poupée*, 1938-49
Decomposition and fluidity	Exaggeration of soft curves	Jacques Lipchitz, *Femme allongée*, 1921

	Biomorphic decay and melting	René Magritte, *Le double secret*, 1927
Ensemble with objects and non-human animal parts	Metamorphosis of bodies into objects	Man Ray, *Le Violon d'Ingres*, 1924
	Aggregation of fragments through collective play	Max Ernst, André Masson, Max Morise, *Cadavre exquis*, 1927
	Prosthetic parts	Oskar Schlemmer, *Stäbetanz*, 1927
	Oniric hybridization	Victor Brauner, *Prestige de l'air*, 1934

5. Contemporary appropriations of Modern compositional tactics in Disability Arts and Culture

When assessing the disruptive value of Disability Aesthetics in Modern compositional tactics, several considerations emerge. The first concerns the scope of their disruption, both in terms of intentionality and historical impact. Modernist art movements often engaged with disability as a symbol or trope, utilizing dismemberment, disproportion, and fragmentation to challenge traditional aesthetic norms. However, these representations frequently reduced disabled bodyminds to ornamental spectacles, serving the agendas of avant-garde movements more interested in redefining artistic languages than addressing systemic ableism. The emphasis on the symbolic value of disability tropes becomes particularly apparent when compared to contemporary practices, where disabled artists assert agency through self-representation and direct engagement with lived experiences.

For instance, while Hans Bellmer's *La Poupée* and Pablo Picasso's fragmented portraits disrupt the visual conventions of the normate, these works often reflect an external gaze that commodifies disability as a means to achieve aesthetic innovation. In contrast, contemporary artists such as Carmen Papalia and

Chun-Shan Yi prioritize embodied experiences, employing compositional tactics to challenge societal narratives and reclaim autonomy. Their work underscores a significant shift: from using disability as a metaphor to positioning it as a lived reality imbued with resistance and creativity. Amanda Cachia's critique aptly distinguishes these practices, noting that while Surrealism and related movements embraced the fantastical and symbolic, contemporary artists center their own corporeal realities, creating deeply personal and political expressions. The degree of agency held by disabled individuals in these artistic processes also demands scrutiny. In Modernist contexts, disabled bodyminds often served as subjects for artists who were not themselves disabled, echoing exploitative traditions such as the freak show. Questions arise about the dynamics between artist and model—did these individuals consent to their portrayal? Did they share in the creative process, or were they merely tools for an external vision? These dynamics contrast sharply with contemporary practices, where disabled artists consciously stage their own bodies, employing theatricality, masking, and exaggeration to subvert objectifying gazes and assert control over their representations.

The interplay between historical Modernist aesthetics and contemporary Disability Justice practices reveals both continuities and ruptures. While Modernist movements laid the groundwork for questioning traditional norms of bodily integrity, their engagement with disability often remained confined to the realm of abstraction and symbolism. By contrast, contemporary disabled artists explicitly confront the social and political structures that marginalize them, using art as a platform for activism and empowerment. The documentary *An Unshamed Claim to Beauty in the Face of Invisibility* (2013) by Sins Invalid exemplifies this shift, capturing performances and testimonies by artists such as Nomy Lamm and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, who foreground their lived experiences in their creative work.

Nomy Lamm's 2020 performance as part of Sins Invalid, "Honey," vividly demonstrates this embodied and performative reclamation of narrative agency. Donning golden silks and lace and accompanied by a pot of honey, Lamm evoked a queen bee's fluidity and power, intertwining their queer, nonbinary, and disabled identity with the sensorial richness of honey and flesh. This portrayal resists symbolic abstraction, inviting audiences into an intimate, tactile world that celebrates the complexity of disabled embodiment. Similarly, Carmen Papalia's non-visual practice leverages the Surrealist tactic of disproportion to critique normative navigation tools. His 2014 performance with a super-long

white cane disrupts conventional understandings of accessibility, rendering the audience acutely aware of how such norms structure public spaces. Chun-Shan Yi extends this ethos into the realm of wearable art with their project *Crip Couture*, which integrates disabled participants in the design process to explore themes of intimacy and desire. By emphasizing the aesthetics of disability through wearable objects, Yi transforms garments into declarations of identity, agency, and beauty, challenging societal discomfort with the disabled body-mind.

Contemporary Disability Justice practices underscore the imperative to build counter-hegemonic imagery that dismantles systemic ableism and reclaims the narrative power of disabled bodyminds. By situating contemporary Disability Aesthetics in relation to Modernist traditions, we can identify both a lineage and a rupture: a shared interrogation of normative ideals, but with diverging stakes and methods. Modernist art questioned the coherence of form and the ideals of wholeness, yet often did so from an external, abstract perspective. Disability Justice artists go further, reclaiming this disruption as a lived, embodied reality—transforming artistic expression into a vehicle for both critique and celebration. It is within this complex interplay that contemporary Disability Aesthetics achieves its most potent expressions of resistance and transformation.

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