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# Disrupting Disability: Social Practice Art

Jaimi Clifford  
*University of Maine*

Students of DIS 450 and DIS 520

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**Introduction**

Visuality and imagery are two powerful mechanisms embedded within cultures that perpetuate as well as reflect structural violence. Despite the serious harm caused by unchecked cultural violence, it is often overlooked, particularly as it appears or is absent in image. This study examines how image both creates institutional violence exercised through discrimination against aging and disabled populations and how socially engaged art, curation, and performance are being used to disrupt and reverse oppression, discrimination, and exclusion. The work of multiple socially engaged Artists/curators/performers was examined to unpack the creative process, reasoning, and artistic approaches that are being used to subvert ensconced but unrealized discriminatory memes. Understanding the social practice art process therefore provides critically important guidance for understanding, teaching and innovation in socially engaged productions.

**Methodology**

A naturalistic study relying on individual interview of diverse artists/curators/performers answered the following research questions:

- How do social practice artists/curators/performers identify their focus and method?
- What are the factors that characterize the process of social practice art specific to disability and aging?
- What outcomes are expected from the project?
- To what extent are these outcomes realized and how?

**Data Collection**

Individual interviews were conducted with a range of social practice curators/artists/performers. The following questions framed the interviews.

1. How did you identify the focus and method for your work? What factors in your life led to this interest and agenda?
2. Can you describe your work/project now with regard to its content, process, genre? How did this work evolve?
3. What imagery/themes is/are central to your work? What do you want people to see?
4. What outcomes do you hope to achieve from your work/project for yourself? Viewers? Disabled and elder populations? Other?
5. To what extent are these outcomes realized and how do you know?
6. Do you consider yourself a social practice or socially engaged artist or practitioner? Why or why not?
7. What else can you tell me about your work that would help me to understand how it evolved, your current practice and what you hope to achieve?

**Analysis**

All interviews were transcribed. Thematic analysis was conducted to reveal the range of practices, processes, and outcomes.

**The Informants**

- A dancer – Jerron Hermon
- A disability fashion and design advocate – Liz Jackson
- Curator, Smithsonian Cooper Hewitt Design Museum – Cara McCarty
- A documentarian photographer – Anthony Tusler
- An academic/multi-media artist – Kevin Gotkin
- A design academic, University of Dundee – Graham Pullin
- A fabric artist – A. Laura Brody
- A curator/scholar – Amanda Cachia
- Performance artist – Carmen Papalia
- Research-based artist – Jeff Kasper
- Painter/photographer – Kathryn Husk
- Founder and Artistic Director, Axis Dance Company – Judith Smith

**FINDINGS**

**Range of Productions**

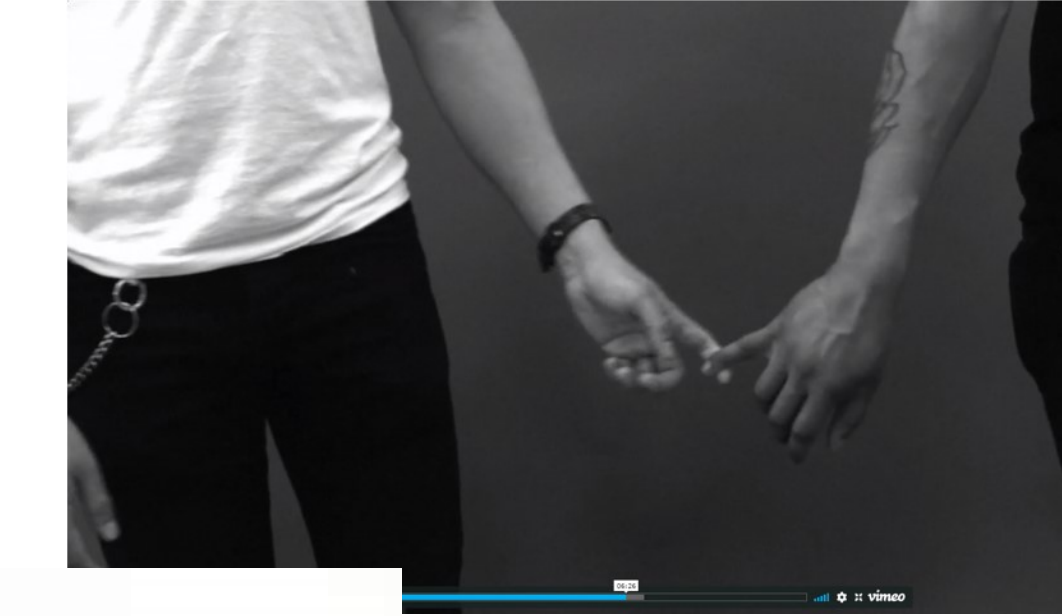
- Nightlife accessibility in NY
- Luminestic-Cane that lights up to users heartbeat
- Dancing in Times Square
- Sounds of Disability
- Photography of disability rights movement from the vantage point of a wheelchair
- The Disabled List-brilliant strategies to live in a world that is not designed for our bodies
- Community-based performance art
- Access+Ability Exhibit-Smithsonian Cooper Hewitt Design Museum
- Opulent Mobility

**What provoked them?**

- Rejection
- Loved one or self is/became disabled
- Commitment to equal rights
- Their own bodies
- Inductive practice
- Curiosity
- Creativity

**Their processes**

- Range from empirically informed to inductive and unfolding
- Mild to “in your face disruptive”



**So what do they accomplish?**

- Awareness that we “live in a disabling society
- Inspiring envy through beautiful design
- Highlight stigmatizing attitudes
- Disruption
- Emotional response
- Call to action
- Changes in perception of human value
- Move from the “ugly to the ingenious brand”

