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Research paper

Disability aesthetics and the body beautiful: Signposts in the history of art

L'esthétique du handicap et la beauté du corps : des indications dans l'histoire de l'art

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Abstract

The discovery of fragmentary classical sculpture in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries reorients the making of art toward broken bodies, changing the nature of sculpture as an aesthetic form. But this category shift in the ideal of beauty also makes an opening for the emergence of disability aesthetics: the recognition that the disabled body becomes a valuable resource for the creation and appreciation of new art forms. The idea of disability aesthetics may be traced via disability signposts in which ancient works reminiscent of disability and modern works devoted to disability cross historically to create a powerful line of descent for the emergence of disability as an aesthetic value in itself.

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Résumé

La découverte de sculptures classiques, fragmentaires, au xv^e et xvi^e siècles réoriente l'art vers les corps abîmés et transforme en même temps la nature propre de la sculpture en tant que forme esthétique. Ce déplacement dans la conception de l'idéal de beauté permet également l'émergence de l'esthétique du handicap, c'est-à-dire la reconnaissance que le corps handicapé devient une source de grande valeur pour la création et l'appréciation des formes nouvelles de l'art. On peut repérer cette idée de l'esthétique du handicap, au long de l'histoire de l'art dans certaines manières d'indiquer que les oeuvres anciennes peuvent

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évoquer le corps handicapé et dans des oeuvres modernes consacrées au handicap. Ainsi se manifeste un courant puissant qui met au jour le handicap comme valeur esthétique en soi.

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On the cusp between the 15th and 16th centuries, classical Greek and Roman statuary began to rise out of the ground—with the help of shovel and pick. The *Apollo Belvedere* was unearthed around 1490. The *Laocoön* was discovered in 1506. Probably the most beautiful sculpture of all, the *Torso Belvedere* (not to be confused with the *Apollo Belvedere*), was above ground for a century before it was discovered and championed by Michelangelo. Unearthed sculpture has one obvious and defining feature. It is nearly always broken. The *Apollo Belvedere* was discovered intact, the *Laocoön* nearly so, but the *Torso Belvedere* was little more than a beautiful fragment and, according to the father of art history, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, most beautiful because it is so severely mutilated. The head, collar-bone, and shoulders of the *Torso* are split off and lost forever. Both limbs are severed at the knee. Almost 300 years later, the history of beauty was shaken once more, this time by the discovery of the female counterpart of the *Torso*. The Venus de Milo emerged from the ground in 1820, arriving late to the ball, but immediately declared to be the eternal standard of aesthetic and female beauty, despite the fact that she is missing both her arms.

The dazzling image of shattered bodies presented by fragmentary classical statuary penetrates almost immediately into the eye and mind of artists, who turn toward the artworks with feelings of awe rather than away from them in revulsion, who fight to preserve their fragmentary state rather than make the slightest effort to restore them to wholeness, who begin to mutilate their own works in order to imitate the perfection of the ancient broken bodies. Because the artists fall in love with broken bodies, so over time do we, the beholders of the art objects. No one bats an eye today at the fact that the Venus de Milo, although damaged, holds an honored place in the Louvre. She is not ruined by her flaws but beautified.

Leonard Barkan notices in *Unearthing the Past* this surprising evolution in the history of beauty, charting the impact of fragmentary statuary in the early modern period. He labels a “category shift” the development that transformed in this era sculptural fragments, separate from any possibility of becoming whole again, into objects of beauty capable of receiving attention and admiration (122). The “whole project of making art,” Barkan concludes, is reoriented “in response to broken bodies” (209).

This category shift constitutes, to my mind, one line of descent for the emergence of what I call “disability aesthetics,” the sea change affecting the history of art that increasingly provokes a preference for disabled bodies over non-disabled ones as we enter the modern age (Siebers, 2007). Another line of descent, almost concurrent, is the emergence of depictions of Christ’s suffering and defiled body in artworks representing the Passion cycle (Stiker, 2006, 2007). Disability aesthetics asserts the incontestable conclusion that modernist techniques and formal experiments render bodies whose shapes mimic deformation, whose coloration resonates with disease conditions, and whose subject matter takes on explicitly the representation of physically and mentally disabled people. The history of aesthetics evolves in the direction of disability, and we are all growing ever more conscious of this fact with every passing moment (Siebers, 2008).

If beauty is supposed to be flawless, and disability shows nothing but flaws, how do we account for the remarkable fact that modern art is preoccupied with human bodies that can only be described as disabled? How does beauty thought broken at first glance becomes beauty adored as perfect at second glance? And, finally, how might we expect the idea of beauty given to us by the history of art to change our everyday idea of beauty? Will we ever get to the stage where we see in our neighbor's disabled body the same radiant beauty that we experience when we gaze upon the *Torso Belvedere* or the Venus de Milo?

Here are a few snapshots capturing important moments in the evolution of disability aesthetics. We might call them “disability signposts”—at first strange and then more frequent appearances of disability, not quite recognizable as such, certainly not designed as such, and then unrecognizable as anything else, until the subject of disability emerges explicitly as itself, chosen consciously by both non-disabled and disabled artists. A disability signpost is a work through which the influence of disability on the history of aesthetics may be read. Signposts are often crossing points where historical forces mingle. They are at once deeply chronological and anachronistic, simultaneously historical and non-historical. They make evident that disability as a concept bears weight backwards in time, giving meaning retroactively to images and ideas for the advancement of disability aesthetics. It is through these signposts, I want to suggest, that the aesthetic value of disability arises and comes to dominate the history of art.

The *Torso Belvedere* is badly damaged (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Belvedere_torso_by_jmax.jpg). But Michelangelo supposedly declared that no attempts be made to restore it. Kneeling before it as before an altar he found that “this is the work of a man who knew more than nature” (Barkan, 2000). Winckelmann saw in the *Torso* the perfect masculine form. He explained that the sculpture stirred the beholder to powerful feelings because it was incomplete. Headless, the sculpture nevertheless presents as a seat of noble and lofty acts of contemplation; armless, the work lifts the world around it; legless, it seems the height of mobility, ready to stand up and leave behind in the distance those viewing it (Winckelmann, 527–29). The seal of the *Torso* as perfection personified reaches its zenith in the story, perhaps apocryphal, that Michelangelo smashed with a hammer one of his finished works in order to complete it. In any event, Michelangelo's “habit of abandoning, not finishing, or even mutilating his sculptures” may be ascribed, Barkan claims, to the category shift in aesthetic beauty brought about by the influence of works such as the *Torso Belvedere* (206). Michelangelo's *Slaves* and *Prisoners* do not need to be finished to be thought beautiful.

Although the *Torso* represents the height of masculine form, its beauty is neither represented as disabled nor reproduced as fragmentary, except in drawings, until much later in time. Michelangelo obviously incorporates his vision of the *Torso* into many of his works, including *Victory* and various figures in the *Last Judgment*, especially notable in the depictions of Christ and Saint Bartholomew. But none of these figures is missing head and limbs. At that moment in history, to make such an image would have been too radical a gesture, and we have to wait until Auguste Rodin to find a sculptor who revels in broken beauty, sometimes radically fragmentary, as in *L'Homme qui marche* (1900–1907), a heroic male body missing its head and arms but not its legs.

It is the Venus de Milo, however, that represents the most singular signpost in the evolution of disability aesthetics, for she becomes as time advances increasingly associated with the disabled body (Fig. 1). When the statue was found, discovered with it was the Venus's left hand, but it was never attached to the body because it was less finished than other parts of the artwork. The Venus was from her discovery conceived as most complete and beautiful in her fragmentary state. The Venus is also the occasion for the first artistic statement in art history on the inevitability of seeing broken statuary as the representation of disabled people. René Magritte, the surrealist painter, took

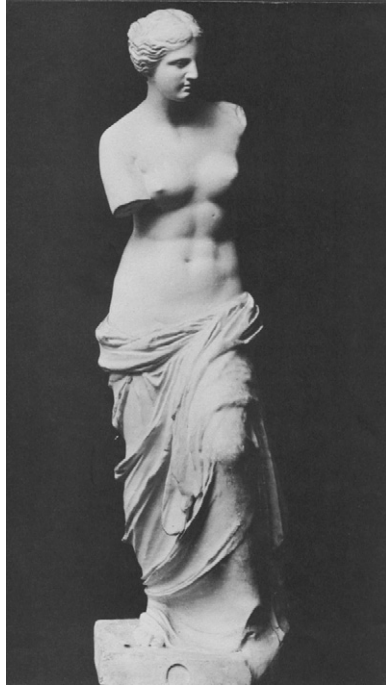


Fig. 1. *Venus de Milo*, circa 100 B.C.E. The Louvre, Paris. (C) RMNj/©Hervé Lewandowski.

a dramatic turn toward realism or hyperrealism by depicting the Venus as a double amputee. He painted his version of the masterpiece, *Les Menottes de cuivre* (1931), 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 (Fig. 2).

A transitional figure in the conception of the Venus as a disabled woman is Aristide Maillol, the celebrated French sculptor. He did not name his versions of the Venus as disabled, but a number of his works are strongly suggestive of the conflict between disabled and non-disabled bodies in conceptions of female beauty. Most obvious is the sculpture, *Harmonie* (1940), but more significant may be an earlier and little discussed painting. *Les Deux Baigneuses ou Dina de dos et profil* (1938) shows Maillol trying to import into painting the concern with volume indicative of a sculptor. He paints two versions of Dina Vierny, seen from behind and in profile and facing each other, in order to gesture toward the image of a three-dimensional sculpture (Fig. 3). But the confrontation between the two figures produces as well a face-off between a disabled and non-disabled woman. The non-disabled woman, lying in the grass next to the pool, exists in the here and now. She is certainly beautiful. But the armless and legless woman floating on the surface of the pool, whether the reflection of the non-disabled woman or her twin rendered limbless by immersion in water, arises as the undeniable apparition of beauty. She is the dream of woman, whether haunting her non-disabled twin or Maillol himself. It is the armless and legless woman, then, whom Maillol appoints as the summit of aesthetic perfection, mimicking the captivating vision of female magnificence given to him by the Venus de Milo.

It takes disabled artists to bring the evolution of disability aesthetics to a next stage in which disability is deliberately and explicitly represented as disability, not in the name of surrealism but



Fig. 2. René Magritte, *Les Menottes de cuivre* 1931, ©Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels. (C) 2008 C. Herscovici, London/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

in the name of a different aesthetic value—disability itself. Mary Duffy, the Irish performance artist, begins in the 1990's to impersonate the Venus de Milo. Born without arms, Duffy presents herself to the audience fully nude or draped, while reciting statements challenging the vision of her as defective and claiming her place alongside the Venus as a disabled beauty (Fig. 4). She repeats the questions routinely posed to her by those unable to grasp her disability: “Were you born like that or did your mother take those dreadful tablets? Did you have an accident?” She also throws back into their face the speech of doctors: “You have words to describe me, congenital malformation.”



Fig. 3. Aristide Maillol, *Les deux baigneuses ou Dina de dos et profil* 1938. Musée Maillol, Paris © 2008 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.



Fig. 4. Mary Duffy, video-still taken from Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell, *Vital Signs: Crip Culture Talks Back* 1995.

But she disputes the power of medical vocabulary, claiming a body image whose aesthetic beauty has been celebrated for almost 200 years and that feels right to her: “I felt my body was right for me . . . Whole, complete, functional” (Mitchell and Snyder). Mary Duffy emerges as a modern day Venus not by shunning disability but by incarnating it.

Whether Marc Quinn discovered the inspiration for his signally important and beautiful series of sculptures, *The Complete Marbles*, in his vision of sculptural fragments at the British Museum or took it from the work of one of his subjects, Alison Lapper, is not clear and may not be significant. The combination of their vision catapulted Quinn and Lapper into controversy, celebrity, and another vision of beauty when Quinn’s *Alison Lapper Pregnant* was placed on the fourth plinth in London’s Trafalgar Square in 2005. Lapper, born without arms and with foreshortened legs, had already begun to represent herself as the next incarnation of the Venus de Milo before she met Quinn. In *Untitled* (2000), she photographed herself in series against a black backdrop, mimicking the standard photographs of the Venus de Milo in art history textbooks (Fig. 5). The year before, she had photographed herself in wings, representing herself in *Angel* (1999), as the *Nike of Samothrace* (see Millett). Like Duffy, Lapper engages in a deliberate recuperation of her own image as belonging among the most celebrated and valued representations of female beauty in the history of art.

These artworks produce a baffling but crucial bending of time in the historical interpretation of aesthetic beauty. The images that Duffy and Lapper make of themselves are seen as beautiful because they recall so powerfully the vision of beauty affirmed in the history of art by the Venus de Milo. But these images also change retroactively the perception of the Venus, for her beauty now incorporates necessarily the presence of disability. We cannot see Duffy and Lapper without seeing the Venus, and we cannot see the Venus without seeing Duffy and Lapper.



Fig. 5. Alison Lapper, *Untitled* 2000.

Marc Quinn's *Complete Marbles* probes to the heart of this historical puzzle. The series, of which *Alison Lapper Pregnant* is a part (Fig. 6), devotes itself to the representation of disabled people born without arms or legs or who have lost them in accidents. The subjects are cast in beautiful, snow-white Carrara marble, and upon first glance, they appear to be updates of classical fragmentary statuary. Only a second glance reveals that Quinn is not mimicking breakage as did his forebears, Michelangelo, Rodin or Maillol, but representing disabled people. Consider a few examples of the subjects and their reactions to Quinn's project. The subject of *Catherine Long* was born having no left arm. "People like myself—disabled people," Long understands, "have felt that people relate to a broken statue differently to the way they might to a person with a disability" (Quinn 26). *Tom Yendell* depicts a subject who was born without both arms. "Sculpting an unfinished human form as a finished form," Yendell thinks, "is absolutely brilliant"



Fig. 6. Marc Quinn, *Alison Lapper Pregnant* 2005. Trafalgar Square. Photographed by Steven Mullaney.

(Quinn 43). The idea for the sculptures came to Quinn when visiting the British Museum and observing the reactions of people to the artworks “in a condition of mutilation.” He began to think that “if someone from real life came in who had a similar form, the reaction would be completely the opposite. In this instance, avoidance would replace aesthetic scrutiny” (Quinn 4). The thought experiment eventually brings Quinn to the conclusion that I have been tracing here, one synonymous with the emergence of disability as a modern aesthetic value of increasing interest: “if the Venus de Milo had arms it would most probably be a very boring statue” (Quinn 4). This conclusion compels Quinn to create a series of sculptures of people missing body parts. These sculptures are not boring but exhilarating precisely because they depict disabled people. They are beautiful for the same reason.

These last images by Duffy, Lapper, and Quinn are not images of disability at the periphery, such as the dwarfs in Vélasquez’s *Las Meninas*, but images of disability that demand to stand at center stage. For this reason, it is only right and just that *Alison Lapper Pregnant* found an honored place on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square.

My point is not that all the artworks discussed here represent disability intentionally but that intentions are rendered obsolete by the force of a retroactive reading of disability that recoups any semblances of disability in past works and demands that they be viewed anew as avatars of disabled people. Disability presents increasingly as the key figure in the production and appreciation of art, one that becomes synonymous with aesthetic value itself (Siebers, 2009). Not only is this evolution crucial because it embeds the perception of disability in some of the most creative and valued practices in human history but because it throws open the door to the work of disabled artists, whose images of themselves and other disabled people must now take their place alongside other treasured visions of beauty.

How far the evolution of disability aesthetics will advance is difficult to predict. We are a long way from picking out disabled people in the street as the pinnacle of human beauty. Unfortunately, they are almost everywhere stigmatized and disdained as inferior and ugly. But in the world of art, things are changing. In this one corner of the human universe, the one with the greatest claim to create and recognize beauty, people with disabilities are radiant.

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