

Fragmented Productivity: *Here&Now13*

AMANDA CACHIA



1/ Lisa Uhl, *Turtujarti (walnut trees)*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 120cm, image courtesy the artist © the artist; photo: Mangkaja Arts Resource Agency

2/ Pat Carter, multimedia performance, image courtesy and © the artist; photo: Nic Montagu

Unless otherwise indicated, all images are of work shown in *Here&Now13*, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, Perth, 2013



In her recent book, *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), theorist Judith (Jack) Halberstam talks about a 'commitment to the fragment over any fantasy of future wholeness'.¹ Following Halberstam's lead in her attention to queer theory, I'd like to position her thinking within a discourse of disability politics, and how the fragmented, so-called 'failed' disabled body can be located as a site of fragmented productivity. As Halberstam asks, 'can we think about this refusal of self [in the form of fragmentation] as an anti-liberal act, a revolutionary statement of pure opposition that does not rely upon the liberal gesture of defiance but accesses another lexicon of power and speaks another language of refusal?'² How can 'becoming disabled' be represented through contemporary art practices that demonstrate power in the body *as it is*, rather than a form that is striving to be otherwise? *HERE&NOW13* showcases the work of eleven artists from Western Australia who identify as disabled and who locate their alternative embodiments in the present, without recourse to claiming difference through politicised binaries, changed futures or presenting their work as antithetical to pathology, even normality.

According to disability studies theorists David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, the characterisation of disability often results in indelible, overwrought portraits, often depicted in contemporary art. But in the context of this recent showcase of work at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, presented by DADAA (Disability in the Arts,

Disadvantage in the Arts Australia), the artists proved that the fragment can be implemented in new, re-signifying form. In other words, they are not only providing new definitions of what we might consider 'disabled'; they are also altering traditional understandings and definitions of 'disabled'. The audience encountering their work had opportunity to consider how the fragment can become a more complex embodiment in the hands of disabled artists.

According to Tobin Siebers, 'modern art claims disability as the virtuoso sign of the aesthetic, increasingly presenting disability as an aesthetic value in itself'.³ For example, the surrealists and the Dadaists began to distort bodies in new forms, seeing beauty in the body made grotesque or fractured. It is important to then ponder what *is* the signification of the metaphor of the fragment within art practice? The fragment seems to symbolise disruption – it is the body in chaos, the body broken. The fragment is a symbol of loss. In her seminal essay, 'The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity', art historian Linda Nochlin has outlined that while she does not wish to propose some 'grandiose, all-encompassing theory of the fragment', she still believes that it should be grounded 'on a model of *difference*'.⁴ She also acknowledges the dual marvellous/horrific function that the fragment continues to have on art work, and traces its lineage in different periods and movements in art history, starting with paintings, drawings and sculptures from the French Revolution,



What Can a Body Do?, installation view, Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery, Haverford College, PA, 2012; photo: Lisa Boughter

through Impressionism, Surrealism and more modern art practices of Louise Bourgeois, Robert Mapplethorpe and Cindy Sherman. Even though Nochlin argues that the fragment assumes new transgressive forms in the practices of these contemporary artists, such as the notion that the body is hardly unified or unambiguous, these artists and Nochlin still exclude any discussion around the intersections and the impact of this rupture for disabled subjectivity.

I believe one important way a viewer is able to imagine this rupture and ‘reassign meaning’ to disability and fragmentation is by engaging with exhibitions that explore disability as a generative critical theme, as demonstrated by the artists in *HERE & NOW 15*. Contemporary disabled artists are demonstrating new meaning through the inscriptions in their sensorial art practices. For example, in 2011, I curated my first exhibition exploring themes of disability where I also attempted to create new meaning. *Medusa’s Mirror: Fears, Spells & Other Transfixed Positions* was held at Pro Arts Gallery in Oakland, California (13 September to 20 October) and included eight disabled artists challenging the gaze of the non-disabled subject.⁵

In Greek mythology Medusa was viewed as a monster, and gazing directly upon her would turn onlookers to stone. In many ways, the disabled subject has similar stereotypical qualities to Medusa – that of being monstrous, and transfixing viewers with fear, curiosity or wonder. This exhibition’s agenda was to shift Medusa’s position, and thus make unstable the disabled subject as agent and cause of fear, spells and transfixed positions. This gives reason for able-bodied viewers to reflect on their own frameworks. I wanted viewers to learn that the disabled body is anything but transfixed. The exhibition gave artists agency to make bold aesthetic statements about their bodies and their lives.

In 2012, I curated my second exhibition focusing on issues of disability, entitled *What Can a Body Do?* for Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery, Haverford College in Pennsylvania (26 September to 16 December).⁶ This exhibition attempted to narrow the question originally posed by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze into: ‘what can a *disabled* body do?’ my ‘Introduction’ to the

exhibition’s catalogue essay states:

Further, this exhibition asks, what does it mean to inscribe a contemporary work of art with experiences of disability? What shapes or forms can these inscriptions take? How, precisely, can perceptions of the disabled body be liberated from binary classifications such as ‘normal’ versus ‘deviant’ or ‘ability’ versus ‘disability’ that themselves delimit bodies and constrain action? What alternative frameworks can be employed by scholars, curators, and artists in order to determine a new fate for the often stigmatised disabled identity?⁷

The essay continues:

... we haven’t even begun to understand the potential of our bodies! Most of us know even less about the disabled body. It is important to think about what disability *does* rather than simply what it *is*. Such reframing breaks binary constructs as it is focused on a type of concretised being-in-the-world, on the truths of living *inside* a disabled body.⁸

As Simi Linton notes, we are currently deficient in our language to describe disability in any other way than as a ‘problem’, so the defining is simultaneously a challenge and a curse. However, following Halberstam’s lead in her insistence on thinking about ‘failure’ and ‘fragmentation’ within an alternative productive framework, we are faced with the opportunity to articulate a richer and more complex thinking about an experience of disability. Feminist and disability studies scholar Barbara Hillyer says:

Instead of creating dichotomies between good and bad words, we can use accurate descriptors ...we can struggle with distinguishing our own definitions ... the process is awkward; it slows down talk; it is uncomfortable [but] it increases complexity.⁹

Ultimately, as a curator who just happens to have dwarfism, who works with artists who may or may not have disabilities or identify, I must take great care to note the



Clive Collender, *Stilfontein, South Africa, December 1957*, 2013, pencil and pen on paper, 21 x 28.3cm, image courtesy and © the artist; photo: Acorn Photo Agency, Perth

intersectional specificities of their gendered, cultural, racial and generational contexts and avoid the reduction that I work against in exhibitions like *What Can a Body Do?* In spite of these challenges, the work by disabled artists must be placed within a general field of art practice so as to integrate the emergent discourse of complex embodiment with critical art and disability studies discourse. While the art gallery is indeed a powerful incubator for radical, activist ideas in relationship to the exposure and education of disability politics to a general public, the complex reactions by disabled artists throughout my curatorial practice point to how they are still attempting to define (or undefine) themselves as they negotiate their relationship to disability within the art world amidst lingering notions of mainstream stigma and ableism. These types of affective responses to participation, passing, identity, labels and ambiguity also tellingly point to the challenges and evolutions of the field of disability studies itself, as it continues to define itself in a time of complex intersectional politics and hybrid identities. Given that disability's marginalised position is generated by a mainstream societal discursive regime, the art gallery's turn towards disability as a space that often reproduces 'normative' representations, offers an important solution to combating and shifting disability's loaded language and thinking. DADA continues to successfully lead and initiate much more organic conversations about how art about disability moves us and why it matters, incorporating multiple sensorial perceptions that can all work cohesively and dynamically.

1. Judith Halberstam, 'Queer Negativity and Radical Passivity', in *The Queer Art of Failure*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2011, p. 138.
2. Halberstam, 2011: p. 139.
3. Tobin Siebers, 'The Aesthetics of Human Disqualification', in *Institute on Disability Studies*, Temple University, PA.

4. Linda Nochlin, 'The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity', in *The Twenty-Sixth Walter Neurath Memorial Lecture*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1994, p. 56.
5. Artists included Joseph Grigely, Carmen Papalia, Neil Marcus, Katherine Sherwood, Laura Swanson, Sunaura Taylor, Sadie Wilcox and Chun-Shan (Sandie) Yi, with various media represented.
6. This exhibition featured the work of nine contemporary artists: Joseph Grigely, Christine Sun Kim, Park McArthur, Alison O'Daniel, Carmen Papalia, Laura Swanson, Chun-Shan (Sandie) Yi, Corban Walker and Artur Zmijewski. Each demonstrated new possibilities for the disabled body across a range of media by exploring bodily configurations in figurative and abstract forms.
7. Amanda Cachia, 'What Can a Body Do?', curatorial/catalogue essay in *What Can a Body Do?*, Haverford College, Pennsylvania, 2012, pp. 5-23.
8. Cachia, 2012.
9. Barbara Hillyer quoted in Juliet Robson's 'Ten Years On: Re-Presenting Vital, Problematising Playing Fields', in Aaron Williamson (ed.), *Parallel Lines Journal*, 'In the Ghetto', 2011, 5 Mar 2012: parallellinesjournal.com

Here&Now15 recently showed at Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia, Perth, 26 July to 28 September 2013 as part of the Gallery's annual focus on emerging WA artists. Participating artists included Katarina Barber, Patrick Carter, Clive Collender, Aquinas Crowe, David Guhl, Tim Maley, Julian Poon, Jane Ryan, Robert Turpin, Lisa Uhl, and Robin Warren: lwgallery.uwa.edu.au

Amanda Cachia is a PhD candidate in Art History, Theory & Criticism at the University of California, San Diego. Her dissertation will focus on the intersection of disability and contemporary art. She is a Masters in Visual & Critical Studies graduate (2012) from the California College of the Arts (CCA), San Francisco, and also a Masters in Creative Curating graduate (2001) from Goldsmiths College, London. This article is a re-edited version of her essay in the publication accompanying *Here&Now15*.