The Flesh of the World: An Empirical Turn toward Complex Embodiment

Amanda Cachia

To cite this article: Amanda Cachia (2017) The Flesh of the World: An Empirical Turn toward Complex Embodiment, Art Journal, 76:3-4, 68-75, DOI: 10.1080/00043249.2017.1418488

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2017.1418488

Published online: 30 Jan 2018.
Terence Dick stated, “Contemporary exhibitions that touch on disability-related themes and subject matter often fall into two common interpretations: one that reductively and simplistically equates the person (usually the artist) with his or her disability, and the other that regards disability as an index of our shared humanness.” Through The Flesh of the World, a twenty-four-artist exhibition that I curated in summer 2015 across three different gallery spaces at the University of Toronto in conjunction with the PanAm and ParaPanAm Games, I offered a nuanced and empirical approach to issues of “complex embodiment.” The late disability studies scholar Tobin Siebers coined the term “complex embodiment” in reaction to the limitations of the ideology of ability, as it implies that the perception and experience of disability is nuanced and contingent. Complex embodiment can offer layers of inquiry and take us down an unconventional path, so that categories of difference, identity, and disadvantage in relationship to disability can no longer be essentialized. Dick elaborated on my exhibition in his review in Border Crossings:

The exhibition aimed to suggest that there is no one monolithic definition of disability, and resisted relying on an all-too-easy template or discursive framework based on the uniformity of other marginalized identity categories such as gender, race, or sexuality. This was illustrated through a lack of uniformity of the bodies that were on display, and while one might perceive a possible ghettoization of subjects based purely on their diagnostic determinations, Cachia evaded this problem endemic to many exhibitions bringing together disability and art by not programming it exclusively with art about disability. In Flesh of the World, while some artists identified as disabled, many others did not. The participating artists included Louise Bourgeois, Ann Hamilton, Martin Kersels, Bruce Nauman, Stelarc, and Artur Zmijewski. Through a hybrid collection of works, some requiring direct visitor participation and engagement, I aimed to draw the viewer into a new understanding of adaptation, in the hopes that the primitive idea that disabilities must be overcome can slowly be erased.

In an exhibition of this nature, in which the articulation of disability can easily be misunderstood and misinterpreted, the politics of complex embodiment were not only visible on a multimodal stage, but were performed: by the artists, certainly, and especially by the audience. Within the context of the exhibition, I relied on a basic definition of empiricism that suggests that it is a modality for gaining knowledge through direct and indirect observation or experience. These interactions within the exhibition can be logged as a type of empirical evidence—although certainly not a rigid form of it—one in which the idea is that it is only upon one’s direct encounter with objects which force physical adaptation that one’s mental assumptions and stereotypes can be broken down. This essay will demonstrate how this empirical turn toward disability in curatorial practice, evident in The Flesh of the World, might impact art history at large, and how it can be premised on a curatorial model that moves. In other words, to get an audience moving and experimenting through adaptation is to shape an audience...
Leonardo da Vinci, *Vitruvian Man*, ca. 1487, pen and ink with wash over metal point on paper, approx. 10 x 10 in. (25.4 x 25.4 cm). Collection Galleria dell’Accademia, Venice (artwork in the public domain); and *Le Corbusier, Le Modulor, 1945*, drawing (artwork © 2017 F.L.C./ADAGP, Paris/Arts Rights Society (ARS), New York)

Image descriptions: In the drawing at left, two overlaid outlines of a nude man standing with arms outstretched enclosed inside a square and a circle. One version of the man has legs positioned straight and arms positioned horizontally, touching the edges of the square, while the second version of the man shows his legs positioned at a diagonal and resting on the enclosed circle at the base, while his arms are also outstretched diagonally, with tips of fingers touching the enclosed circle. The drawing at right shows a silhouette outline of a muscular man standing to the left of the page, raising his left arm high into the air, surrounded by measurements of different parts of his body to demonstrate so-called universal measurements of the average man’s body for design purposes.


thinking about and empathizing with disability differently, in a bid to transform entrenched, reductive attitudes.

**Breaking out of Concentric Circles: A Flawed System**

Conventional art history has not accounted for the reality of disabled subjects and their bodies. The ostensibly “normative” male and female body has become internalized as an aesthetic ideal, with a lineage going back to Leonardo da Vinci’s *Vitruvian Man* (1487) and Le Corbusier’s *Modulor* (1943).\(^5\) The iconic image of *Vitruvian Man* incorporates a perfect circle in a thinly drawn line that represents the cyclical and uninterrupted flow of so-called normal up-and-down movement that the arms should make at the side of the body; the legs are engaged in similar gestures back and forth, but the drawing especially demonstrates proportion and symmetry, and that a body in proportion and with symmetry is a body that fits within a pristine circle. The *Modulor* is an anthropometric scale of proportions devised by the Swiss-born French architect. It is based on the six-foot height of a man with his arm raised. The measurements do not represent the diversity, form, and shape of all bodies; translated into architecture and our built environment, the measurements create barriers for disabled people. The art historical aesthetic ideals of perfection, proportion, and beauty are found in classical sculpture and modernist sculpture, and in architecture through the golden section, “an average measure conforming to man.”\(^6\) The eighteenth-century German art historians and writers Gottfried Lessing and Johann Winckelmann posited that, in the words of Michael Davidson, “a realistic depiction of a ‘misshapen man’ is less important for its verisimilitude than for its demonstration of artisanal superiority. What is clear . . . is that the ability of aesthetics to define affective and sensory response depends on—indeed, is constituted by—bodily difference.”\(^7\)

Regrettably, the widespread representation beyond art history and the academy of a bodily ideal in *Vitruvian Man* and *Modulor* contributes to ableist attitudes and discrimination against the disabled minority. This is because there is an internalized, almost unconscious assumption of able-bodied-ness in art theory and praxis; if
the assumption becomes “disrupted” by non-normative corporeal forms, then these forms have historically been rejected, and marked as pathological, diseased, and “other.” While bodily ideals have shifted in art (such as the mannerist bodies of the late sixteenth century, or rococo bodies), the primary narrative of art history still goes back to the da Vinci/Corbusier norm, which remains especially dominant in popular culture. The so-called ideal representations of the body illustrated in Vitruvian Man and Modulor are also replicated through bodies in motion, especially in choreography and dance studies. Within dance studies, we see the same redundant and restrictive categorizations of bodies, for instance in the drawings from Carlo Blasis’s 1820 Traité élémentaire, théorique et pratique de l’art de la danse (An Elementary Treatise upon the Theory and Practice of the Art of Dancing). These drawings ostensibly indicate proper geometric relations and proportions of the body, which recall da Vinci’s demonstration of correct angles, lines, and limbs.

It is the disabled body that seeks to infiltrate the architectures of this world most radically, because body and architecture do not fit. These bodies and architectures create a discord, like a doorsill that is too high, or a table whose legs topple on a surface of uneven tiles. I argue that these imperfect situations in the environment are part of the landscape, and our language of “fixing” and “modifying,” whether applied to furniture or bodies, belongs to a medical model of disability. If we consider the social model of disability, which apportions the proliferation of reductive attitudes toward disability to society and not the individual, then we might ask how the disabled body changes or alters the environment to suit its needs better as an adaptation, given that the world was not built for complex embodiment. For example, consider how a napkin is placed under one table leg to balance it out and keep it still so it no longer wobbles while one sits at the table eating dinner—this is an environmental adaptation, rather than the environment imposing its restrictions on an uneven table leg, with little opportunity for modification. The point is that we cannot assume that so-called standards operate universally toward all tables (and all bodies). Therefore, I seek to find a way in which to break the so-called perfect concentric circles of the Vitruvian Man through an empirical turn that relies on adaptation and change.

Changing Position: Mobilizing Disability

The idea of breaking out of concentric circles, both in theory and praxis, was inspired by the striking image of arguably one of the most powerful actions by the disability movement. On March 12, 1990, scenes of dozens of disabled people
crawling out of their wheelchairs in Washington, DC, were broadcast to media outlets all over the world. These images were captured by the photographer Tom Olin, who has become an important figure in the disability rights movement for his work as a “social documentarian” and for his “tireless advocacy spanning three decades.”

Olin’s eight-year-old niece Jennifer Keelan was one of the activists who left her wheelchair to crawl up the one hundred steps of the United States Capitol; she attracted special media attention owing to her young age. As the wheelchair-less bodies hauled their forms up the stairs of the Capitol, this iconic scene became the ultimate performative disabled act in public space, a highly effective way to “dramatize the barriers confronting them” both physically and metaphorically. As Lennard Davis wrote, “The gritty look of the crawl brings out the power of activism in the face of power.”

The activist grass-roots group ADAPT, formed in 1978, was fighting for new policy, for what was to become the Americans with Disabilities Act, signed into law by George H. W. Bush later in 1990. Even though the legislation, which was endorsed by Bush, had broad backing, it had been moving at “glacial speed.” By crawling up the stairs, the subaltern body became literalized and personified as “lower” class in this act of societal disruption. Rather than remaining locked in their stationary positions low to the ground, the disabled subjects became mobilized literally and metaphorically in order to radically transform and subvert marginalized positions. The activists developed a new voice and language to challenge the oppressor and mainstream discourses of “normal” and “abnormal.” In their act of animalistic, insect-like mobility, they effectively transported their identities into a radical sphere of equal participation, citizenship, and agency, and at the same time, they called attention to their lowly status as their crawl through public space became spectacle, making it impossible for people to avoid staring. The disability rights movement therefore made “great strides in resisting the devaluation of disabled persons by insisting on legislation that protected them against discrimination, secured equal opportunities in housing and employment, and mandated a built
An essay by Rosalind Krauss entitled “Horizontality” has offered some rich possibilities to the ideas presented in this essay, as the art historian ponders the notion of “formless” or informe through the work of artists such as Jackson Pollock that resonates with movement, position, and complex embodiment. Krauss speaks of the significance of the horizontal, noting that “the floor had become a production site that was set in direct opposition to the vertical axis of the easel of the artist’s studio, or the wall of the bourgeois apartment, or the high-cultural ideals of the museum. But the product of this horizontal site was cultural nonetheless in that it continued to be a representation . . . the horizontal plan [therefore] might be understood as an axis at variance with the vertical orientation of the canvas.”

Krauss here was particularly interested in thinking through how Pollock worked in opposition to the ostensible “nature” of the verticality of looking and producing art from the upright body. She states, “Pollock wished to strike against form, and thus against the axis of the human body . . . . The floor, Pollock’s work seemed to propose, in being below culture, was out of the axis of the body, and thus also below form.” Indeed, Pollock forced his viewers to look down, given that the axis of the image had now changed.

All these ideas have a striking connection to the disability activism described in the previous paragraph. The now wheelchair-less activists crawled along and up the Capitol steps on that March day in 1990, challenging the ostensibly normative idea of how a body is meant to move in a vertical, and implied “polite,” position. Similarly, Pollock also provided provocative food for thought within the world of art production, as he moved the easel from the upright position so that the canvas was placed directly on the ground, where he developed his famous paint-splatter technique by crouching over it with his brush and looking directly downward. Each of these horizontal acts—both the crawling bodies and Pollock’s hunching over the landlocked canvas—forced viewers, standing in their environment that would be conducive to freedom of movement for all kinds of physical impairments.”

15 Ibid., 94–95.
16 It is important to recognize how the “performance” of Pollock’s gestural markings was constructed through the photography of Hans Namuth, as critiqued by Amelia Jones in “The ‘Pollockian Performative’ and the Revision of the Modernist Subject,” Body Art: Performing the Subject (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).
vertical positions, to look downward to observe what was taking place, each shattering the ideal of a correct form and viewing position, and ultimately suggesting that the axis of the human body need not subscribe to a so-called standard for movement. For this reason, Pollock’s work and Krauss’s writing on it resonate and speak to a similar index of radical moving when considering the disabled corporeal form. The term *informe* was first developed by George Bataille in a brief essay in which he suggests that *informe* functions to “bring things down in the world.” While Krauss applies Bataille’s work here to Pollock and his horizontality in painting, I additionally apply *informe* to the present essay based on its notions of destroying fixed categories in art and celebrating the “debased,” which has readily been associated with the disabled subject. The *informe* or “debased” in Bataille and Pollock’s world, which takes on these qualities and characteristics of radicalism, is therefore worth noting if we associate its revised angles, positions, and movements with the complex embodiment of the human body.

Through *The Flesh of the World*, I sought to disrupt the ideals of ostensibly correct form, shape, and movement ingrained in art history, both through audience interaction and observation at the level of horizontality. I did so by bringing into the exhibition many works that had the capacity to engage the audience, particularly three variations of the Canadian-based artist Mowry Baden’s Seat Belt devices, *Seat Belt, Three Points* (1970), *Seat Belt with Concrete Block* (1969–70), and *Seat Belt with Pole and Two Straps* (1969–70), which were installed at the three exhibition venues across two separate campuses. This three-pronged series of physically pivotal sculptures that rotate around a center point reflects Baden’s interest in movement and its impact on perception, and required that viewers physically operate them, demonstrating the artist’s performative and collaborative approach with the audience. Of this work, Baden says,

Like so much of my art, it attempts to downplay vision . . . you can know that the path you’re traveling is not a pure circle, but only after you’ve made mul-

---

Multiple journeys. The seatbelt here, with three points of attachment, is the sublest of them all. You can walk around for ten minutes before the geometry begins to click in . . . the needle swings over to the non-visual senses gradually. The viewer gradually discovers where the sensory challenge is. And the experience is complex. Personally, I can’t exhaust it. Even today, I can’t wear it out. I began to realize this is a completely different territory for exploration.

While these works arguably do not offer much in the way of aesthetics, once one straps into the devices and begins to circle the central anchor point, one is able to grasp the experience of moving with a body that isn’t completely under one’s control. Through this interactive work, Baden illustrates a shared human ability to adapt to bodily circumstances that shift and alter. Indeed, through the Seat Belt series, Baden is unwittingly turning the viewer’s attention to an experience of complex embodiment. The sense-motion of traveling in a circle while strapped into a device that modifies movement offers new knowledge. The adaptations the body makes under these new ambulatory circumstances are necessarily creative and inventive, for one must learn how to navigate space differently: physically, cognitively, and multisensorially. One may come to appreciate newly discovered bodily skill, form, shape, and gesture, or revel in the choreographic possibilities under this new corporeal regime that blends together objects, bodies, and space in a dynamic, evolving environment. Certainly, Baden achieves these results through this work, and while the effect of the body in motion under the reins of the recontextualized seat belts is subtle, I argue that it also attempts to draw the viewer into an equation with the artists in the exhibition and the larger community of people with disabilities.

In this Seat Belt series, Baden breaks the concentric circles of Vitruvian Man through his use of concrete blocks and other objects that obstruct the so-called perfect path and force the body to adapt and make an adjustment. During the installation and opening of the show in June 2015, I strapped on Baden’s Seat Belt with Concrete Block and walked in concentric circles in a clockwise direction, meanwhile raising and placing one leg repeatedly on my right side whenever my body would inevitably encounter the concrete block that seemed determined to block my path. I had to step and climb over it to maintain consistent movement and keep on my way. The concrete block caused my hip to rise up uncomfortably, and in the process, it served to remind me of the curvature in my spine due to scoliosis. I couldn’t tell whether the up-and-down movement on my right side was actually balancing out and so “correcting” my always already off-kilter stature, as the curvature causes one side of my body to be slightly raised and higher than the other. I also thought that perhaps the tingling pain from my spinal stenosis (a result of brachyolmia—a rare form of dwarfism) was being triggered by the negotiation of Baden’s concrete block, but it was not. After several sequences of this gesture, I stopped, undid the seat belt, and returned to my own daily version of complex embodiment, distinct, and yet in parallel with Baden’s series: both require ambulatory adjustments of being-in-the-world.

Another way to think through this potential of reprogramming thought in movement is through the framework of empathy. Susan Foster offers a definition —to “choreograph empathy . . . entails the construction and cultivation of a specific physicality whose kinesthetic experience guides our perception of and
connection to what another is feeling.” If I am to insist on the generative framework that an empirical turn toward complex embodiment promotes in art practice, then empathy must be a part of this conversation. Certainly, this is what was occurring in the work of Baden. Rather than simply asking his viewers to gaze on his work as impassioned yet distant onlookers, Baden invites them to immerse themselves directly in his work, so that they experience movement within specific parameters and geometries. Foster describes this choice: “Instead of casting one’s self into the position of the other, it became necessary to project one’s three-dimensional structure into the energy and action of the other.” Through his interactive work, Baden invites visitors to imagine another’s physical experience along with their own, without presuming knowledge, and without being accused of relying on imitation practices that also carry unacknowledged privilege. Baden’s work on corporeal epistemes focuses on largely underdeveloped motions of the disabled body, and he aims to provoke empathy—to use the art historian Grant Kester’s phrase, a “compassionate recognition of difference.”

An empirical turn toward complex embodiment in curatorial and exhibition practices opens up new possibilities for thinking about, and empathizing with, the disabled body. The moving disabled subject has been an understudied area in curatorial practice, and The Flesh of the World adopted a disability-centered approach to performance, choreography, identity, and visual culture. As the art historian Jennifer Fisher observes, “Movement, as well as vision, is crucial to display rhetorics that require enactment to mobilize their significance.” When artists encourage an audience member to directly participate in acts of movement, beyond the confines of representation, the participant can trace different methodologies and approaches to the newly adapted body, in a context in which none is more valid or “correct” than the others. The politics attached to the choreography of disability comes into focus when contemporary artists such as Baden literally strap us into a disorienting circular journey that is never even nor smooth, but is rather full of speed humps or blocks. This episteme of disabled geometry extends the disabled subject’s representation from static, two- or three-dimensional form, into form that carries and provides knowledge as it moves in space and time. Through this interactive engagement, the participant can also question the nature of able-bodied privilege prevalent in art history, performance art, and society itself, along with questions about agency, body-centered assumptions, entitlement, power and control, authenticity, and the possibilities and limits of certain bodies over others. The choreography of disabled bodies is therefore a political project because the ambulatory pathways of these bodies, in atypical shapes and forms, challenge our assumptions of an able-bodied and ostensibly normative art history. Similar in scope to feminist, queer, and critical race interventions within the canon of art, my work suggests that an evolving definition of disability aesthetics provides new opportunities and directions to curate art history.

Amanda Cachia has curated over forty exhibitions, many of which iterate disability politics in contemporary art. She is an assistant professor of art history at Moreno Valley College in Riverside, California, and director of the new Moreno Valley College Art Gallery, scheduled to open in fall 2018. She completed her PhD in art history, theory, and criticism at the University of California, San Diego, in spring 2017. Her exhibition Automatisme Ambulatoire: Hysteria, Imitation, Performance will open at the Owens Art Gallery at Mount Allison University in New Brunswick in fall 2018.

19. See Dick, 43–44.
21. Ibid., 11.