

INTRODUCTION

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It saddens me to write this introduction for the special Issue of *Synnyt/Origins*, Finnish Studies without John Derby. John Derby died August 9 in his hometown in Kansas, US. He was only 46 years old and looking forward to a new chapter in his life. He had recently overcome an extremely difficult period in his life, and was prepared to face the future. This makes his death all the more senseless and painful. We will not forget John Derby's kindness, brilliance, competence, and editorial mastery. He has pioneered critical/disability studies in art education with book chapters and his many articles in peer-reviewed art education and disability studies journals. His body of work has become the foundation for many undergraduates, graduates, and professors internationally. He made unforgettable and significant impacts on his colleagues, students, family and friends.

The fall 2018 Special Issue of *Synnyt/Origins*, Finnish Studies in Art Education brings together international disability studies specialists in the arts. Inspired by the first International Conference on Disability Studies, Arts and Education in Helsinki Finland at Aalto University, September 28-29, 2017, the authors represent the diverse notions and interpretations of critical disability studies in art education. They also represent diverse "cultural locations," that recount "highly specific located examples of disability in cultural contexts" (Barker & Murray, 2010, p. 224), an area that needs more exploration in disability studies.

While disability studies might be considered a relatively new field, its entrance into the arts

in education is still finding its bearings. Disability studies has had a long enough history to allow it a self-reflexive look, while disability studies art educators are looking outward for affirmation among colleagues. Thus, the first International Conference in this new field affords us a critical moment to gather notions about what we hold as the principles of the arts as an educative force in critical disability studies.

I can attest to my own experience when explaining what I do as an art educator and researcher whose subject is disability. Assumptions almost without exception fall under one of two categories: Special Education and/or Art Therapy. Education in the United States has institutionalized disability within a special needs frame, requiring “special” services, teachers, classrooms, and curriculum. Outside of the classroom, children and adults with disabilities can expect to find therapeutic experiences with the arts, or art therapy, in hospitals, community centers, or private sessions. As disability studies educators, we recognize that art is neither a side effect of a disability or a diagnostic tool, both of which are ableist artifacts of the medical industrial complex. In a commentary in the journal *Studies in Art Education*, Derby (2013) wrote that the few recent articles about disability are usually written by nondisabled educators who make recommendations based on the medical model, and those had neither infiltrated mainstream art education research, nor made an impact on practice. He noted that in *Studies in Art Education* only seven articles related to disability were published between 1990 and 2013.

The authors in this issue speak about similar experiences in countries such as Finland, Germany, Russia, Switzerland, and Greece. The limited public knowledge of disability studies in art education, and the entrenched services that have government and public support, are the challenges we face in this nascent field. In several of the articles in this issue, authors describe dissatisfaction with traditional methods in the art museum, art classroom, or theatre that led them to inventions and interventions based on their commitment to disability as a valuable way of being in the world; their commitment to physical and neurological difference, especially,

as Ralph and Emily Savarese (2010) write, “when that difference seems incapable of producing prized forms of competence. . . . There are myriad ways to be present, connected, and alive; myriad ways to have relationships” (para. 17). This sentiment is important given the media hype surrounding the hyper-talented savant and the self-trained Outsider when we speak of the arts and disability, who are implicitly presented in the mainstream as the only disability art worth writing about. This is clearly what the authors seek to dismantle: the notion that the arts only matter if they produce genius, which unfortunately becomes little more than entertainment. Turning these instances inside out is the job of disability justice. The subjects of the articles in this issue are young people and adults who want recognition for who they are, not what they are not or might be.

Before summarizing these diverse accounts of originality and innovation, I will describe briefly the recent evolution of disability studies and its induction into arts education.

Disability Studies and Embodiment

The term disability studies was first used by Michael Oliver, and proposed in 1976 by disability activists belonging to the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS), as a definition that rejected medical accounts of disability in favor of a social model. Oliver (1990) made a clear distinction between impairment as a biological function or description of the physical body, and disability as a social impression imposed by environmental conditions (Maybee, 2017). The distinction clearly marked disability as a cause and responsibility of social and institutional structures rather than of the “tragic” individual who must seek services. Garland-Thomson (2011) uses the term misfit to underscore the disabled person’s lack of fit in the built environment.

After primarily ignoring the body in disability studies since 1976, disability scholars, especially women, have returned to the body as an inevitable part of disability discourse. As Julie

Maybee (2017) recounts, the body has taken on more significance within the context of “new materialism (realism)” and feminist theory. Thus, while the distinction between impairment and disability was politically necessary in the beginning of the disability rights movement, the return to an embodied presence was crucial in including bodily experiences in the conversation. The problem in the social model was that the body was perceived as ontologically timeless, pre-social, and separate from the self (Hughes and Paterson, 1997). In other words, writes Maybee, the body is “experienced and defined in ways that are shaped by the social—by concepts, by language, by beliefs, and by social practices” (pp. 300-01). She argues that obstructions, such as “rampless” stairs faced by wheelchair users are not only a mis-fit between the body and the built environment, but rather a collision with Western cultural values that favor the “individual, physical independence and ‘normalcy’” (p. 305). Maybee’s research in Africana and Indigenous philosophy led her to question the Western notion of the body as an individual impairment. It might be impossible for we Westerners to believe, but in some traditional societies such as the Suya Indians in Brazil, the body is perceived as shared among a group through bodily parts, fluids, and substances. This way of understanding the body makes bodily difference a group responsibility. We Western disability studies scholars are also predominantly white and write about white disability primarily in Europe and America. So there is still much work to be done, especially in historically colonized cultures. We hope that future international conferences and special journal issues will seek globalized disability scholarship. (See Shaun Grech and Karen Soldatic)

Disability Studies in Art and Education

In the United States, we owe a debt of gratitude to Doug Blandy (1989) who questioned the efficacy of medical labels that public education has used since the beginning of IDEA, the Federal Special Education law. As Blandy wrote, these laws devolved into low art teacher

expectations, and the rationalization and legitimization of ability-based segregation. Thus, he suggested that while categorization might be expedient for medical treatment, its usefulness is questionable in an educational context. Blandy (1991, 1994) was the first art educator in the US to describe the significance of relocating what he called a functional-limitations model to a sociopolitical model in art education (Eisenhauer, 2007; Derby, 2011). It was not until the mid 2,000s that art educators with disabilities, such as John Derby and Jennifer (Eisenhauer) Richardson, revisited Blandy's research by advancing critical disability studies in art education with such notions as including the disabled individual's life experience in the curriculum as expert knowledge.

This issue affirms that international interest in critical disability studies is growing. For example, in "The Wind Is the Power: Social Empowerment for Disabled Performers Through Development and Performance of Personalised New Musical Interfaces," Andy Best-Dunkley writes, "I firmly believe that art is political and can bring about change." Dunkley advocates for physically disabled people with a re-inquiry into diverse ways of moving through space, even if it means disrupting it. As a media and fine artist, Dunkley uses technology with performers who have physical disabilities to challenge the notion that they cannot or do not dance. In this article, he tells the story of two performers in Magic Dance and Dancehearts, with whom he developed electronic sensors and devices that controlled music and sound. These technologies become known as T/Act-Tools in action, harnessed for artistic expression for physically disabled dancers.

Kelly Gross' "Representation, Re-presentation, and Representin' through Graphic Novels" investigates modes of representation of the disability experience in the graphic novel. Gross examines how in graphic novels and comics disabled subjects are characterized as pitiable, helpless victims, and/or burdens in society. Rarely were they depicted as inclusive members of their community. In order to redress this problem Gross introduced to graduate students in art

education at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, an emerging group of graphic novels published in the last ten years that resist disability stereotypes.

In “Touch the Art: Accessible Learning Opportunities for the Blind and Visually Impaired,” Jeremy Johnson describes how he and his wife established opportunities for individuals with impairments in the art room and museum. With funding from Nebraska Arts Council, the National Endowment for the Arts, and other sponsors, Johnson began workshops called Sensory: Please Touch the Art in 2016. These intergenerational workshops were for people of varied backgrounds and experience in the visual arts. The planning of the workshops carefully considered the transportation and environmental needs of the participants, two significant barriers to accessibility. Towards this goal he employed Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a guideline for full inclusion.

Alexander Ivanov and Joana Monbaron’s independent project Tracings Out of Thin Air, which began in 2015, is a research-in-practice project in a suburb of Russia. In their article, “Creating Circumstances for an Institutional Pedagogy: Notes on ‘Tracings Out of Thin Air,’” the authors explain that the project began as a response to their frustration with what they call “corporate public pedagogy,” and found a solution “outside the sphere of influence of large [care] institutions.” Ivanov and Monbaron reflect upon what they call “critical praxis,” “by which art education becomes a context in which one confronts with society, with institutions, and with oneself.”

Like Best-Dunkley’s article, Yvonne Schmidt, Sarah Marinucci, Sara Bocchini, and Demis Quadri’s “DisAbility on Stage – Exploring the Physical in Dance and Performer Training,” directs our attention toward the disabled performer, not as a cameo performance, as Michael Davidson (2008) writes, but to turn “their cameo appearances in such theatres back upon the audience, refusing the crippling gaze of an ableist society and reassigning the meanings of disability in their own terms” (p. 1). The authors write that the purpose of their “stage laboratory”

project, DisAbility on Stage, with two Universities in Switzerland, was “to encourage discourse on disability at art schools and universities and to put the resulting insights into practice.” The authors examine the project in its early stages. Results show that both universities have been positively impacted by the stage laboratory, which has become a permanent part of the BA Contemporary Dance curriculum at the Zurich University of the Arts.

Soula Marinoudi, professor of Anthropology, examines the Parallel Support program in Greece, which is meant to promote inclusion of students with disabilities. “‘So, Do You Come to School for One Student Only?’: Reception and Resistances to the Implementation of Parallel Support of Disabled Students in Greece” highlights the personal testimony of a special educator and her relationship with an autistic student. Through the lens of disability studies, Marinoudi argues that the Parallel Support program is undermined by the “logocentrism” of the Greek educational system, which delimits the body, represses affect, and focuses on reason. Commentary by Marinoudi’s autistic student disrupts prevailing assumptions about the autistic experience in mainstream discourse.

Nina Stuhldreher authors an ambitious work that combines poetry and research in “Artistic Knowledge Production and Neurodiversity: Visual Thinking between Nazi Heritage, Ableism Debates, and University Reforms.” She addresses the difficult subject of Germany’s Nazi past and its remaining effects on disability and art. Stuhldreher begins with the hyper-discursive lecture program at DOCUMENTA 13 in 2012, which required visual artists who are not typically discursive thinkers to talk, comparing them with actors with cognitive disabilities in the Disabled Theatre performing only a few meters away. The contrast between the disabled performers and the non-disabled visual artists introduces the complexity of her argument, entangled by Nazi Germany’s past policies with disabled people.

The papers in this special issue respond to the need for greater global and reflexive engagement with disability in discourse, theory, and praxis. We hope that this special issue will be the

first of many in which entrenched concepts of disability are challenged transnationally, making room for spaces that emancipate disability from ableist power structures.

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