

# Book Review: *Contemporary Art and Disability Studies*, John Derby and Alice Wexler (Editors)

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## Biography

Courtnie Wolfgang is assistant professor and graduate program director of Art Education in the School of the Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University, USA. Her research foci include intersections of post-structural, anti-racist, post/feminist, and queer theories with arts pedagogies; school and community teaching; and justice-oriented Arts Education practices.

In the introduction to *Contemporary Art and Disability Studies* (2019), the editors, Alice Wexler and John Derby, reference Jean-Luc Nancy's (2010) claim that art's critical capacity is to "open the world to itself" (p. 3). That phrase resonated with me as I read the chapters that followed, as well as Alison Kafer's (2013) assertion in *Feminist, Queer, Crip* that it is not the body that is disabled, rather the world that disables you. I am not a disability studies scholar, per se. I am a scholar of justice-oriented pedagogies through the arts. And, like the editors and authors of this text, I am interested in seeing critical disability studies become a more centralized component of justice language in the arts moving forward. To borrow from both Nancy (2010) and Kafer (2013), it will indeed require for many an *opening up* to understand how normalization of non-disabled living, more generally, and non-disabled privilege in the arts, more specifically, has produced a world without full access and representation for disabled

people. The editors and authors of this important text have provided paths toward that process through critical evaluation of art making, pedagogy, curatorial practice, and scholarship that centers disability and disabled persons.

A common thread among all the contributing chapters is the necessity to *create a "wider dialogue" around disability* (Kuppers, p. xxiv). The book is subdivided into five sections: Methodologies of Access, Agency, and Ethics in Cultural Institutions; the Politics of Ethics of Collaboration; Embodied Representations of Artists with Disabilities in the Visual and Performing Arts; Emerging from Anonymity: Negotiating the Outsider Art Label; and Life Writing: First-Person Reflections on Disability and Artmaking. I begin with brief summaries of the content of each section and its unifying theme and end with some implications and considerations for arts fields.

## **Part I: Methodologies of Access, Agency, and Ethics in Cultural Institutions**

Part I is about access: whose embodied experiences “get” to belong in a world designed to privilege non-disabled experience? What part one of this book does, collectively, is ask the reader to consider the norms which non-disabled persons take for granted as “universalizing” — even the apparatus of assistance and physical changes made to spaces to “accommodate” are made in response to systems built on a normalcy that must be unlearned.

Chapter 1, “Accessibility in and Beyond the Quagmire of the Present,” Taraneh Fazeli explores the notion of access not being only physical—that disability is bound by expectations of the non-disabled norm regarding time and productivity. As a disabled artist, the author uses her experience to critique museum access. For example, museum visitation with assistive technologies that don’t work, museum staff don’t know how to use, or require weeks of advance notice to reserve. All of these barriers affect the time and planning of something non-disabled

people may regard with ease. Through her scholarship, her curatorial practice, and her installation work, Fazeli pushes beyond the simpler rhetoric of inclusion arguing for the necessity of structural changes in museum spaces. In Chapter 2, “For a New Accessibility,” Carmen Papalia poses the question of *who* state apparatus of assistance are designed for? And how the status of disabled persons would change if the collective politics of communities regarding disability changed. The author suggests a move from “radical access,” or publicly engaged social practice meant to subvert or challenge institutional barriers, to notions of “open access” in museums and cultural spaces which the author describes as temporal, dependent on the participants in the space, communal, and acknowledging everyone’s embodiment of local knowledge.

In Chapter 3, “Inclusion Matters: ‘Are You Sure You Belong Here?’” art educators Karen Keifer-Boyd, Alice Wexler, and Michelle Kraft, along with their students, explore the physical and discursive spaces of belonging: what does it mean to learn in a space not built for you? Exploring feminist, communitarian, and neurocosmopolitan—a feeling “at home with all manner of neurologies”—theories, they propose a “purposeful defamiliarization” (Savarese, 2013) of learning spaces toward belonging beyond compliance.

## **Part 2: Politics of Ethics of Collaboration; Embodied Representations of Artists with Disabilities in the Visual and Performing Arts**

Mira Kallio-Tavin explores the “problems and possibilities” of community-based arts practices in Chapter 4, “Participatory and Community-Based Contemporary Art Practices With People With Disabilities.” More specifically, she thoughtfully and honestly approaches the questions of collaboration working with groups of disabled and non-disabled persons together—whose perspectives and ways of collaborating hold more value? Who creates the community of collaboration? Whose experiences are centered and whose are made invisible?

Similarly, in Chapter 5 “DaDaFest Ensemble: Leadership, Voice, and Collaboration in the

Arts,” the authors Claire Penketh, Anne James, Sam Wade, and Richard Nutter address music education for disabled children and the “dominance of ableist discourse” in music education (p. 77). Like the chapters that precede it, the authors again argue for creating a wider framework of pedagogy centering disabled experience and favoring leadership by and for disabled young people rather than strategies designed for non-disabled people.

For Carol Zou in Chapter 6, "Post-Traumatic Stress Poetics in Socially Engaged Art: Healing as Practice", trauma and post-traumatic stress poetics, critical race theory, and gender studies are lenses through which she examines arts and cultural production. Zou argues for a social model of engagement which centers (“working through”) disability (trauma) rather than pathologizing it. Like Kallio-Tavin, Zou problematizes the ethical practices of what she refers to as stereotypical socially-engaged art project—one—time or short-lived events that abandon community afterwards.

### **Part 3: Embodied Representations of Artists with Disabilities in the Visual and Performing Arts**

Chapters 7 and 8 both give readers opportunities to compare representation of disability, as many are accustomed to it in arts and cultural production (through the gaze of non-disabled bodies), with embodied representation of disability (representation of work done by disabled persons). In Chapter 7, “(The Narrative) Prosthesis Re-Fitted: Finding New Support for Embodied and Imagined Differences in Contemporary Art,” author Amanda Cachia critically examines how contemporary artists’ work that can be considered through Mitchell and Snyder’s *narrative prosthesis* embodies the obscene, abject, and traumatic while subsequently leaving out disability. Cachia proposes that Carmen Papalia and Mike Parr’s artwork provides new vantages through which to challenge these existing tropes via a new methodological emphases on empowerment and agency that offers new rhetorical possibilities for the “prosthetic.”

In Chapter 8, “*Basilisk* and the Representation of Physically Disabled Women in Film,” filmmaker Ann Millet-Gallant cites the common practice of the portrayal of disabled persons by non-disabled actors as paramount to the pervasiveness of ableism. By using herself—both as actor in the film and its narrative reflective of her own experiences—she constructs a story centering a “non or anti-conventional disabled character” opposing mainstream representation of disability. Millet-Gallant employs theories of the social gaze or stare through its exploitation by the main character in her film to make comparisons between her work and more conventional narratives about disability in film (p. 116).

Chapter 9, “The Phenomenological Turn in Disability Arts: Crip Time and Disability Aesthetics,” Carrie Sandahl proposes the framework of political/relational model of disability (Kafer, 2013) as it resists the opposition between medical and social theories of disability. According to Kafer (2013), the political/relational model accounts for the politics of the medicalization of disability while also acknowledging medicine’s role in mitigating the effects of some impairments. Once again, this is a thoughtful investigation in widening the dialogue around disability and problematic norms as the author suggests pushing past a binary model of disability study to suggest that disability can be both/and: respondent to medical progress and socially understood, “creating alternatives [to accommodations] on [the individual’s] own terms and in their own time” (p. 127). She uses artist Matt Bodett’s work as a visual embodiment of crip time to illustrate the brokenness of a system unattending to all persons (not the brokenness of bodies).

Stefanie Snider offers readers an important intersectional investigation of illness, disability, race, age, and sexuality in Chapter 10, “Intimacy and Illness—Visually Representing Lesbian Sexuality and Disability in Tee Corinne’s *Scars*, *Stoma*, *Ostomy Bag*, *Portocath: Picturing Cancer in Our Lives*.” The author discusses artists who use embodiment as sources of artmaking, photography and end-of-life in resistance to the Western dominance of a clinical gaze that categorizes one as ‘normal’ or ‘pathological’. In presenting a narrative of illness, love, and intimacy,

Snider posits Corinne’s photographic accounts—of her partner’s illness and of aging and dying lesbian bodies—counter the Western notion of pathology through authentic representation and likewise resist the popular culture of “disability drag.”

In Chapter 11, “Bill Shannon: The Politics of Dancing,” Jack Richardson and Jennifer (Eisenhauer) Richardson discuss the street performances of Bill Shannon using Rancière’s framework for equality—that equality is a *presupposition* for political action rather than a result of political action—and his concept of the aesthetic regime- the relationships between doing, making, and visibility. The authors present Shannon’s work as providing a critical engagement with dominant socio-political order. The authors conclude with a provocation (after Rancière) that equality is an aesthetic politics, and that Shannon’s work confounds the contradiction of ability/disability and therefore sensible perceptions of inequality.

#### **Part 4: Emerging from Anonymity: Negotiating the Outsider Art Label**

That we (arts broadly) have a term “outsider artist” used widely is one of the reasons this book is so desperately needed in the field. If you read no other section from this collection, I encourage you, if you are an artist or work in the field of arts and cultural production, to read these chapters and do some deep personal reflection on what it is we (arts) consider “inside” and who is therefore on the “outside” (and why)? Further, what does it say about a cultural response to disability (at least in the USA where I have the most lived experience with the health care system) that vilifies or discards disabled people until they, in their difference, present themselves as a commodity? Alice Wexler and Amy Mutza both paint thoughtful pictures of the artists featured in their chapters while also complicating and building on the notion of what “outside” means within the context of disability, artmaking, and experience.

In Chapter 12, “Lee Godie: An Accidental Postmodernist Outsider,” Wexler discusses Lee Godie’s photobooth self-portraits as altered dimensions of Lacanian registers of the Real, Imag-

inary, and the Symbolic. Further, Wexler questions the reasoning of naming artists such as Godie as “outsiders” and how that naming can flatten the complexity, the irony, and the critical consciousness with which other artists (the author compares Godie’s self-portraits to those of Cindy Sherman, for example) are imbued.

Mutza writes in Chapter 13, “Dandies, Vamps, and Rockers: Sex and Disability in the Paintings of Aurie Ramirez,” that Ramirez’s work is subject to a similar flattening complicated further by the in-betweenness of race and disability. In order to engage in a critical discussion of Ramirez’s work while attending to the complexity of Ramirez’s identity, Mutza approaches her analysis through feminist theory, queer theory, and disability studies.

## **Part 5: Life Writing: First-Person Reflections on Disability and Artmaking**

Part Five of this book was one I was particularly looking forward to reading: personal reflections on disability. Again, it’s not that the work hasn’t existed until now, but also—as is reflected in the preceding sections—narratives about disability have been clouded in ableist interpretations, misrepresentations, or overlooked in pedagogy and policy. As with the editors of this book, I believe that the most significantly powerful way to disrupt harmful medical models of disability are through the narratives like the ones included here.

Riva Lehrer investigates what portraiture is to visibly disabled persons in Chapter 14, “Presence and Absence: The Paradox of Disability in Portraiture.” She recounts her own childhood and formal art education, noting the absence of visual representations of disability. She draws parallels to portraiture as a mechanism for social dominance, further reifying ableist ideologies. She discusses the importance of realism and representation in her own work, an “ethical stance. . . to bring the body forward as directly as possible” (p. 195).

What does an autobiographical narrative of illness or disability tell us biographies of disability can’t? John Derby, in “Accidents Happen: An Art Autopathography on Mental Dis-

ability” (Chapter 15) describes the concept of autopathography, or autobiographical narratives of disability and illness, and his employment of autopathography as a framework for sharing autoethnographic research. His candidly open narrative, woven together with visual images, disrupts problematic narratives centered on overcoming and tragedy.

What are the lasting implications of being invisible in the canon of art? In Chapter 16, “Out of the Blue: Art, Disability, and Yelling,” Katherine Sherwood describes how a stroke “upended” her life as a painter, how disability informs her work now, and the importance of the artist-led, collaborative Yelling Clinic in providing a framework to resist commonly patronizing practices of arts-as-healing. How/do disabled people develop a sense of belonging in the professional art world?

Finally, in Chapter 17 Nina Stuhldreher offers readers “An Interview with Four Art Professionals with Disabilities About the Traps and Benefits of Opening Up About Them.” This last chapter diverges from the format of the rest of the book by giving short descriptions of the interviewees (in their own words) and then including their responses to questions related to their disability and daily life, disability and their artistic practice, and openness about disability in their professional lives. This chapter addresses, among other important points, the fears about what can happen when opening up about disability in professional contexts.

The primary implications of this text for the field of arts and cultural production I see as: A contemporized language for arts professionals and arts educators seeking to broaden the terrain of their justice and equity work to include disability studies; and providing perspectives of those living with and living without disabilities. How does one advocate for oneself and how can all individuals challenge normalcy.

I feel as though this book—or chapters from this book—should be required reading for arts educators and policy makers and other arts professionals, particularly those who are non-disabled. For those not new to disability studies, this text provides context of a lesser-explored



area within disability studies as a field: arts and cultural production. For those new to the tenets upheld by disability studies, it also serves as a primer to language and concepts relevant to the arts but also disability studies itself.

I close by echoing the sentiments of the editors: I also “look toward the post-institutionalized movement that has established several art communities for disabled artists who honor the artists’ autonomy and resist assigning them artificial labels” to center the lives and experiences of disabled people in my work toward justice in the arts and education (p. 3). I am thankful for the work put forward by the editors and contributing authors of this text.

*Contemporary Art and Disability Studies*

**Alice Wexler and John Derby, Editors**

**Foreword by Petra Koppers**

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