

INTRODUCTION

Crippling Visual Cultures: Introduction

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In 2010, the late disability studies scholar Tobin Siebers published his field-altering book *Disability Aesthetics*. This publication was among the first to argue that disability was not missing from modern art and visual culture but instead palpably present—it had just been consistently overlooked or misinterpreted. Siebers exposed the previously unacknowledged and pivotal role of disability within the history of art by arguing that disability in art should not be limited to merely a matter of the artist’s biography or obvious representation in subject matter. Instead, disability in art is present as a style, an aesthetic. Or, as he wrote, “disability is properly speaking an aesthetic value, which is to say, it participates in a system of knowledge that provides materials for and increases critical consciousness about the way that some bodies make other bodies feel.”¹ This special issue of *RACAR*, “Crippling Visual Cultures,” honors the legacy of Siebers’ *Disability Aesthetics* by continuing to mine disability’s unremarked centrality to art history and visual culture studies’ methods and systems of valuation. “Crippling Visual Cultures” also extends this legacy by confronting the promise and the pitfalls of what it means to cripple visual cultures.

Significantly, that fact that this foundational text for crip art history and visual culture studies, *Disability Aesthetics*, was written by Tobin Siebers, a scholar of literary theory and not an art historian, is indicative of the somewhat slow (if not suspicious) embrace of disability studies by art history and visual culture. Traditionally, disability studies and crip theory have been aligned with literary theory, particularly in English and Gender and Women’s Studies departments in the United States. However, over the past two decades, art historians, art curators, scholars of visual culture, and visual artists have gradually taken up disability studies and crip theory to begin to form the new disciplines of crip art history and visual culture studies, contemporary crip art, and crip curation.²

In the last fifteen years, and especially in the last five years, there has been a marked increase in contemporary artists and art exhibitions taking up disability identity and disability politics to reframe both the role of the artist and the curator to embrace a disability aesthetics and an ethical orientation toward care and interdependence including, to name only a few: *Re/Formations: Disability, Women, and Sculpture* (Davidson College, 2009); *What Can a Body Do?* (Haverford College, 2012) *Indisposable* (Ford Foundation Gallery, 2020–22); *Sick Time, Sleepy Time, Crip Time: Against Capitalism’s Temporal Bullying* (multiple locations, 2016–20); *Resistance and Respiration* (Contemporary Calgary, 2023); *Creative Growth: The House That Art Built* (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2024); *For Dear Life: Art, Medicine, and Disability* (Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 2024–25); and *The Art of Disability Justice Now* (AmplifyMN, Minneapolis, 2024–25). In particular, Cachia and Cooley (along with Cooley’s longtime collaborator Ann M. Fox) have helped to reimagine the field of crip curation and the role of the curator as activist. Cooley and Fox have made intentional strides toward a curatorial ethos of crip-collaboration by taking the “co-” in “co-curating” and “collaboration” as an ethical imperative that they argue is a defining feature of disability art and practice. In the 2024 exhibition *The Art of Disability Justice Now*, Cooley takes this ethical orientation of collaboration in curating further through a deep engagement

1 Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 20.

2 In particular, see: Amanda Cachia, *Curating Access: Disability Art Activism and Creative Accommodation* (New York and London: Routledge, 2023); Jessica A. Cooley, *Crip Materiality* (in publication); Ann Millett-Gallant, *The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art* (London: Palgrave Macmillan: 2010); Ann Millett-Gallant and Elizabeth Howie, *Disability and Art History from Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017;

2022); Keri Watson and Timothy Hiles, *The Routledge Companion to Art and Disability* (New York and London: Routledge, 2022); and Alice Wexler and John Derby, *Contemporary Art and Disability Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021). These scholars have been among the first art historians to chart a new path for what a crip art history is and what it can do.

3 Sins Invalid, “10 Principles of Disability Justice,” *Sins Invalid*, September 17, 2015, <https://www.sinsinvalid.org/blog/10-principles-of-disability-justice>.

with the principles of the Disability Justice Movement³ to understand that, as Cooley writes, the principle of

“Leadership of Those Most Impacted” is particularly important to upending traditional curatorial models where non-disabled curators and art institutions act as sole arbiters of what is worthy of display. To take the principles of the Disability Justice movement seriously, curatorial methods must shift to not just being “community-advised,” but truly community-curated where the community forms the curatorial committee that makes decisions about the exhibition themes and artists using a consensus voting method.⁴

In other words, a shift towards a horizontal model of decision-making means that art institutions can act as the support structure for the community and not the other way around.⁵

Through the *crip* imagination of contemporary artists themselves, a *crip* art history and visual culture studies and *crip* curation have also continued to expand. Contemporary artists like Indira Allegra, Sins Invalid, Raisa Kabir, Carolyn Lazard, Riva Lehrer, Park McArthur, Alex Dolores Salerno, Judith Scott, Katherine Sherwood, and Sandie Yi, to name only a very small number, have created a landscape where the conversation about what disability art is and why it matters has drastically shifted from being one dominated by questions of medicalization and “cure” to, instead, a multiplicity of conversations that embrace the culture and politics of disability as a vibrant and a vital creative force.

Building on the foundational work still being done by these artists, curators, and art historians, “Crippling Visual Cultures” starts with the proposition that failing to attend to the politics of disability in art and the art world obscures the ways that the art world and its histories are shaped by ableist values and rhetoric, while also obscuring the ways that the art world and its histories have also been shaped by the ingenuity of disabled artists and curators. Given the propensity toward “inspiration porn”—the broad portrayal of disabled people as only objects of feel-good, inspiration narratives for abled communities—“Crippling Visual Cultures” also considers the potential of an antisocial turn, initiated by queer and feminist disabled activists and scholars, that embraces the negative, minor, and the general frustration of reducing the complexities of disability art to singular dimensions of “pride” or “celebration.” Further, we understand “crip” as an analytic mode that broadens the critical relevance of disability studies’ inquiry beyond the limiting frame of what is or is not traditionally defined as the proper subject of disability. Here, we explore the possibility of collectively reimagining how art objects, art practices, and art institutions challenge what is traditionally understood as disability art, artists, and art world practitioners, while also holding onto the political and cultural stakes of the varied and sometimes contradictory lived experiences of disability.

We have organized this issue into three motifs: Methods in Art, Museums, and Art History; Viewing, Watching, (Un)Knowing; and Viscerality, Bodies, Unruly Forms. The first section consists of scholarly and creative work that investigates and challenges broad ideas about conventional ableist and colonial Western methods of approaching art in scholarly, museological, and practical fields. The second section consists of contributions that examine the ways in which neoliberal, biopolitical regimes of sight have shaped—and continue to shape—how disability is perceived and practiced in our world. The third section focuses on the ways in which body-based praxis makes, unmakes, and remakes physical and conceptual cultures of viscerality. Rather

4 Jessica A. Cooley, “State of the Field: The Art of Disability Justice,” a forthcoming essay in a publication from the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA, 2025).

5 Ibid.

than segregating research and creative projects, each section of this special issue intertwines academic and artistic contributions, weaving together the theoretical, analytical, and creative to support a holistic understanding of how visual arts and cultures are—and can be—cripped.

METHODS IN ART, MUSEUMS, AND ART HISTORY

The authors and artists in this section ask questions to dismantle assumptions about significant artistic categories, prompting new ways of conceiving of and utilizing crip/ped visual cultures. This section opens with an intervention by Rachel da Silveira Gorman and Jenna Reid, in which they interrogate the ways in which whiteness has been reinscribed within the broad field of disability arts over the past several decades. While writing specifically within and about a Canadian context, the authors' arguments about the ways in which institutionalized disability arts organizations and programming continue to marginalize Deaf, Mad, disabled, and chronically ill Black, Indigenous, and other people of color is typical in the United States as well as other areas of the Global North. The authors use their article to address the widespread racist, colonial, and ableist notion of an "aesthetics of absence" wherein people of color are willfully erased from disability arts organizational work despite their centrality to the field. They propose that following the diverse practices of disabled Indigenous and South Asian artists can help those in the sphere of disability arts imagine generative futures well beyond the limits of colonial practices. Sally Gunhee Kim and Joelle D.J. Wickens ask us to consider what it means to crip the field of conservation science, a mainstay in conventional museum institutions that takes for granted the preservation of art objects as "perfect" examples of their aesthetic and cultural contexts. The authors explore current ableist practices and assumptions about who can be a conservator and how conservation practices are carried out, followed by how the lessons of disability culture can reimagine what conservation science is and can do. In crippling conservation, the authors speak to some of the fundamental issues at stake in art history and museum practices as they meet the everyday factors of disability: balancing care and preservation with interdependence and imperfection and moving against the grain of longevity as a primary ideal. The creative contribution in this section, by Caroline Mauxion, articulates texts and visuals inherent to her artist practices based on the research of a crip phenomenology in the field of photography and drawing.

VIEWING, WATCHING, (UN)KNOWING

This section features artists and scholars examining the ways in which visibility might be both useful and counter-productive, drawing attention to the issues at stake within the fields of visibility and visual arts in a vision-oriented neoliberal society. They question potentially nefarious ways in which surveillance culture can shape how and what humanity is and knows. The artwork and artists in this section resist conventions of looking and assuming knowledge to create alternatives that challenge ableist, racist, and colonialist modes of being in the world. Artist and author Atanas Bozdarov presents his creative text and visual practice grounded in the experience of living with a physical disability using the notion of failure in the built environment, in scholarship, and in mobility devices to highlight structural failures in our ableist world. Bert Stabler also invokes issues of surveillance as he explores the ways in which hospital sites and museum/ gallery sites overlap and simultaneously represent Foucauldian locations of power and discipline. At the same time, Stabler offers readers examples of several art installations by disabled artists that challenge the ways in which disability and illness are portrayed, policed, and remembered within the art and care industrial complexes. A hybrid text by Lucie Camous retraces the emergence and structure of the

French duo *Ostensible*, which is active in research and creation in the fields of disability and crip studies, as well as in contemporary art. Like Bozdarov in his contribution, Camous draws from everyday disabled experiences, modeling one approach to advance the crippling of visual cultural theory through living material encounters with the world.

VISCERALITY, BODIES, UNRULY FORMS

The third section of this issue of *RACAR* takes as its theme bodily forms, expressions, and materiality. The artists and researchers here contend with the substance(s) and configurations of bodies, in pleasure and/or pain, to think through how creative producers shape the ways in which we perceive and enact our changing/ changeable embodiments through visual encounters. We begin this section with artist Grace Flott, whose artworks challenge myths of normalcy in portraits and self-portraits. Her goal of body liberation seeks to resist hierarchies of power in visual representations by working collaboratively with her subjects to highlight, rather than hide, physical marks of disability, pain, and chronic illness. In their contribution, Virginia Marano, Charlotte Matter, and Laura Valterio analyze the ways in which Black British artist Donald Rodney created artwork that embodied his experiences of disability through bodily matter—the literal material from which Rodney constructed many of his artworks. The authors connect Rodney’s experiences with racialization and racism to those of his chronic illness and disability using and moving beyond metaphor to showcase how his Black disabled body constituted his aesthetic messages and materials. Within a United States context, Madelaine Caritas Longman argues that the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat falls within the category of disability aesthetics. While also addressing questions of race and colonialism, Longman discusses how the artist’s imagery of bones and organs is suggestive of medical images, whether x-rays or medical diagrams, as it is used to express Black pain. Authors Kelsie Acton and Sydney Erlikh interrogate the field of dance and choreography using disability aesthetics to demonstrate that, in many arts sectors, the agency of disabled artists have been denied on the basis of monolithic ableist presuppositions and hierarchies of disabilities wherein physical disabilities and chronic illnesses are centered and intellectual disability is marginalized or neglected entirely. Acton and Erlikh’s article suggests that within disability communities some bodyminds are assumed to be more exemplary than others, erasing their agency as creative producers to the detriment of all. Bringing both this section and the issue to a close, Jillian Crochet’s soft, intentionally tactile art asks us to not just get back in touch with touch, but to understand how we can care for those same objects that will need repair as a result of that touch. Here Crochet welcomes the interdependent care of both art object and body where the unruliness of both – crip art and crip body—are embraced.

The essays and creative artwork included in “Crippling Visual Cultures” push the boundaries of what a crip art history and visual culture studies is or could be, raising new questions from emerging scholars and artists that tackle the ongoing difficulties of how ableism thwarts the potentiality of so many disabled artists and art world practitioners. These new inquiries point toward a future where crip theory continues to transform art history and visual culture, but also where art history and visual culture studies transform crip theory. That is, “Crippling Visual Cultures” contends that, in order to fully understand the nature of ableism, we must account for the power of visibility and visual representations not just as illustrative of something else, but as world-changing unto itself.