TOBIN SIEBERS
University of Michigan

DISABILITY AESTHETICS

For Judith Scott, 1943 – 2005

AESTHETICS TRACKS THE EMOTIONS that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies.[1] This definition of aesthetics, first conceived by Alexander Baumgarten, posits the human body and its affective relation to other bodies as foundational to the appearance of the beautiful—and to such a powerful extent that aesthetics suppresses its underlying corporeality only with difficulty.[2] The human body is both the subject and object of aesthetic production: the body creates other bodies prized for their ability to change the emotions of their maker and endowed with a semblance of vitality usually ascribed only to human beings. But all bodies are not created equal when it comes to aesthetic response. Taste and disgust are volatile reactions that reveal the ease or disease with which one body might incorporate another. The senses revolt against some bodies, while other bodies please them. These responses represent the corporeal substrata on which aesthetic effects are based. Nevertheless, there is a long tradition of trying to replace the underlying corporeality of aesthetics with idealist and disembodied conceptions of art. For example, the notion of "disinterestedness," an ideal invented in the eighteenth century but very much alive today, separates the pleasures of art from those of the body, while the twentieth-century notion of "opticality" denies the bodily character of visual perception. The result is a non-materialist aesthetics that devalues the role of the body and limits the definition of art.

There are some recent trends in art, however, that move beyond idealism to invoke powerful emotional responses to the corporeality of aesthetic objects.[3] Andy Warhol's car crashes and other disaster paintings represent the fragility of

---

[1] An illustrated abstract for this essay appeared under the same title, as part of the proceedings of the Conference on Disability Studies and the University, in *PMLA* 120.2 (2005): 542-46.

[2] See Alexander Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*, trans. William Holther (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954).

[3] For in-depth analyses of the relation of art to body trauma, see my "The New Art," *The Body Aesthetic: From Fine Art to Body Modification* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 217-41 and "The Return to Ritual: Violence and Art in the Media Age," *JCRT* 5.1 (2003): 9-32.

the human body with an explicitness rarely found in the history of art. Nam June Paik, Carolee Schneemann, and Chris Burden turn their own bodies into instruments or works of art, painting with their face or hair, having themselves shot with guns, and exhibiting themselves in situations both ordinary and extraordinary. Other artists employ substances thought to be beyond the bounds of art: food stuff, wreckage, refuse, debris, body parts. Curiously, the presence of these materials makes the work of art seem more real, even though all aesthetics objects have, because of their material existence, an equal claim to being real. And yet such works of art are significant neither because they make art appear more realistic nor because they discover a new terrain for aesthetics. They are significant because they return aesthetics forcefully to its originary subject matter: the body and its affective sphere.

Works of art engaged explicitly with the body serve to critique the assumptions of idealist aesthetics, but they also have an unanticipated effect that will be the topic of my investigation here. Whether or not we interpret these works as aesthetic, they summon images of disability. Most frequently, they register as wounded or disabled bodies, representations of irrationality or cognitive disability, or effects of warfare, disease, or accidents. How is disability related to artistic mimesis—or what Erich Auerbach called "the representation of reality"?[4] Why do we see representations of disability as having a greater material existence than other aesthetic representations? Since aesthetic feelings of pleasure and disgust are difficult to separate from political feelings of acceptance and rejection, what do these objects tell us about the ideals of political community underlying works of art?

What I am calling disability aesthetics names a critical concept that seeks to emphasize the presence of disability in the tradition of aesthetic representation. Disability aesthetics refuses to recognize the representation of the healthy body—and its definition of harmony, integrity, and beauty—as the sole determination of the aesthetic. It is not a matter of representing the exclusion of disability from aesthetic history, since such an exclusion has not taken place, but of making the influence of disability obvious. This goal may take two forms: 1) to establish disability as a critical framework that questions the presuppositions underlying definitions of aesthetic production and appreciation; 2) to establish disability as a significant value in itself worthy of future development. My claim is that the acceptance of disability enriches and complicates materialist notions of the aesthetic, while the rejection of disability limits definitions of artistic ideas and

[4] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953). I take up this and other questions about disability and aesthetic representation in "Words Stare Like a Glass Eye: From Literary to Visual to Disability Studies and Back Again," *PMLA* 119.5 (2004): 1315-24.

objects.

To argue that disability has a rich but hidden role in the history of art is not to say that disability has been excluded. It is rather the case that disability is rarely recognized as such, even though it often serves as the very factor that establishes works as superior examples of aesthetic beauty. Disability intercedes to make the difference between good and bad art—and not as one would initially expect. That is, good art incorporates disability. Distinctions between good and bad art may seem troublesome, but only if one assumes that critical judgments are never applied in the art world—an untenable assumption. My point is only that works of art for which the argument of superiority is made tend to claim disability. This is hardly an absolute formula, although some have argued it, notably Francis Bacon and Edgar Allan Poe, what wrote that "There is no exquisite beauty, without some strangeness in the proportion," or André Breton, who exclaimed "Beauty will be *convulsive* or it will not be at all."[5]

Significantly, it could be argued that beauty always maintains an underlying sense of disability and that increasing this sense over time may actually renew works of art that risk to fall out of fashion because of changing standards of taste. It is often the presence of disability that allows the beauty of an art work to endure over time. Would the *Venus de Milo* still be considered one of the great examples of both aesthetic and human beauty if she still had both her arms? Perhaps it is an exaggeration to consider the Venus disabled, but René Magritte did not think so. He painted his version of the Venus, *Les Menottes de cuivre*, in flesh tones and colorful drapery but splashed blood-red pigment on her famous arm-stumps, giving the impression of a recent and painful amputation (figure 1).[6] The *Venus* is one of many works of art called beautiful by the tradition of aesthetic response that eschew the uniformity of perfect bodies and embrace the

---

[5] See Edgar Allan Poe, "Ligeia," *Collected Works*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott, 3 vols (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 2: 305-34, esp. 311-12, Francis Bacon, "Of Beauty," *The Essays* (1627), and André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 160.

[6] Marc Quinn revisits the idea that broken sculpture represents disabled bodies in *The Complete Marbles*. The series presents a number of disabled people who are missing arms and legs. In interviews with his subjects, Quinn asks explicitly whether broken Greek and Roman sculptures have any emotional resonance for them. His exchange with Catherine Long, born without a left arm, is especially intriguing:

> MQ: Before we did this project, when you saw broken Greek and Roman sculptures, did you ever have any feeling that there was a kind of emotional resonance for you that may not have been there for other people?
>
> CL: Not really emotion, but when I've looked at broken statues, I've thought other people probably consider them to be beautiful objects, but I know that's possibly not the way I might be viewed by society as a whole. I know that people like myself—disabled people—have felt that people relate to a broken statue differently to the way they might to a person with a disability.

See Marc Quinn, *The Complete Marbles* (New York: Mary Boone Gallery, 2004), 26.

variety of disability.

To argue from the flipside, would Nazi art be considered kitsch if it had not pursued so relentlessly a bombastic perfection of the body? Sculpture and painting cherished by the Nazis exhibit a stultifying perfection of the human figure. Favored male statuary such as Arno Breker's *Readiness* displays bulked-up and gigantesque bodies that intimidate rather than appeal (figure 2). The perfection of the bodies is the very mark of their unreality and lack of taste. Nazi representations of women, as in Ivo Saliger's *Diana's Rest*, portray women as reproductive bodies having little variation among them (figure 3). They may be healthy, but they are emotionally empty. When faced by less kitschy representations of the body, the Nazis were repulsed and launched their own version of a culture war: their campaign against modern art stemmed from the inability to tolerate any human forms except the most familiar, monochromatic, and regular. Specifically, the Nazis rejected modern art as degenerate and ugly because they viewed it as representing physical and mental disability. Hitler saw in paintings by Modigliani, Klee, and Chagall images of "misshapen cripples," "cretins," and racial inferiors when the rest of the world saw masterpieces of modern art (figures 4 and 5).[7] Hitler was wrong, of course, not about the place of disability in modern aesthetics but about its beauty. Modern art continues to move us because of its refusal of harmony, bodily integrity, and perfect health. If modern art has been so successful, I would argue, it is because of its embrace of disability as a distinct version of the beautiful. The Nazis simply misread the future direction of art, as they misread many things about human culture.

What is the impact of damage on classic works of art from the past? It is true that we strive to preserve and repair them, but perhaps the accidents of history have the effect of renewing rather than destroying art works. Vandalized works seem strangely modern. In 1977 a vandal attacked a Rembrandt self-portrait with sulfuric acid, transforming the masterpiece forever and regrettably.[8] Nevertheless, the problem is not that the resulting image no longer belongs in the history of art. Rather, the riddle of the vandalized work is that it now seems to have moved to a more recent stage in aesthetic history, giving a modernist

---

[7] Cited by George L. Mosse, "Beauty without Sensuality / The Exhibition *Entartete Kunst*," *"Degenerate Art": The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*, ed. Stephanie Barron (New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1991), 25-31, esp. 29. See also my "Hitler and the Tyranny of the Aesthetic," *Philosophy and Literature* 24.1 (2000): 96-110.

[8] See John Dornberg, "Art Vandals: Why do They Do It?," *Art News* 86 (March 1987): 102-9 and "Deliberate Malice," *Art News* 87 (October 1988): 63-65. The most complete general consideration of art vandalism is Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism Since the French Revolution* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 1997). For an enlargement of my argument on disability and art vandalism, see my "Broken Beauty: Disability and Art Vandalism." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 41.2 (2002): 223-45.

rather than baroque impression (figure 6). The art vandal puts the art object to use again, replicating the moment of its inception when it was being composed of raw material and before it became fixed in time and space as an aesthetic object. Would vandalized works become more emblematic of the aesthetic, if we did not restore them, as the *Venus de Milo* has not been restored?

My point is not to encourage vandalism but to use it to query the effect that disability has on aesthetic appreciation. Vandalism modernizes art works, for better or worse, by inserting them in an aesthetic tradition increasingly preoccupied with disability. Only the historical unveiling of disability accounts for the aesthetic effect of vandalized works of art. Damaged art and broken beauty are no longer interpreted as ugly. Rather, they disclose new forms of beauty that leave behind a kitschy dependence on perfect bodily forms. They also suggest that experimentation with aesthetic form reflects a desire to experiment with human form. Beholders discover in vandalized works an image of disability that asks to be contemplated not as a symbol of human imperfection but as an experience of the corporeal variation found everywhere in modern life. Art is materialist because it relies on the means of production and the availability of material resources—as Marx understood. But art is also materialist in its obsession with the embodiment of new conceptions of the human. At a certain level, objects of art are bodies, and aesthetics is the science of discerning how some bodies make other bodies feel. Art is the active site designed to explore and expand the spectrum of humanity that we will accept among us.

Since human feeling is central to aesthetic history, it is to be expected that disability will crop up everywhere because the disabled body and mind always elicit powerful emotions. I am making a stronger claim: that disability is integral to aesthetic conceptions of the beautiful and that the influence of disability on art has grown, not dwindled, over the course of time. If this is the case, we may expect disability to exert even greater power over art in the future. We need to consider, then, how art is changed when we conceive of disability as an aesthetic value in itself. In particular, it is worth asking how the presence of disability requires us to revise traditional conceptions of aesthetic production and appreciation, and here the examples of two remarkable artists, Paul McCarthy and Judith Scott, are especially illuminating.

Paul McCarthy is well known in avant-garde circles for his chaotic, almost feral, bodily performances as well as his tendency to make art from food and condiments. One of the most significant fictions of disembodiment in the history of art is, of course, the doctrine of disinterestedness, which defines the power of an art work in direct proportion to the urgency of the desires and appetites overcome in the beholder. Hunger, sexual desire, and greed have no place in the

Figure 1. René Magritte, *Les Menottes de cuivre* 1931,
© Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium , Brussels.

Figure 2. Arno Breker, *Readiness*, "Great German Art Exhibition" 1939.

Figure 3. Ivo Saliger, *Diana's Rest* 1939-40.

Figures 4 & 5. Two panels, taken from Paul Schultze-Naumburg, *Kunst und Rasse* 1928, juxtapose works of "degenerate" art by Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and Amedeo Modigliani and photographs of facial deformities.

Figure 6. Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait*, damaged by acid in1977.

Figure 7. Paul McCarthy, *Hollywood Halloween* 1977, performance, Los Angeles, CA.
Reproduced by permission of Paul McCarthy.

Figure 8. Paul McCarthy, Hollywood Halloween 1977, performance, Los Angeles, CA.
Reproduced by permission of Paul McCarthy.

Figure 9. Paul McCarthy, Death Ship 1981, performance video, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA. Reproduced by permission of Paul McCarthy.

10. Paul McCarthy, Mother Pig 1983, performance, Sushi Gallery, San Diego, CA.
Reproduced by permission of Paul McCarthy.

Figure 11. Paul McCarthy, *Plaster Your Head and One Arm into a Wall* 1973, performance, Pasadena, CA. Reproduced by permission of Paul McCarthy.

Figure 12. Judith Scott, untitled no date. Photographed by Leon A. Borensztein.
Reproduced by permission of the Creative Growth Center.

Figure 13. Judith Scott, untitled no date. Photographed by Leon A. Borensztein.
Reproduced by permission of the Creative Growth Center.

Figure 14. Judith Scott in action. Photographed by Leon A. Borensztein.
Reproduced by permission of the Creative Growth Center.

Figure 15. Judith Scott, untitled no date. Photographed by Leon A. Borensztein.
Reproduced by permission of the Creative Growth Center.

Figure 16. Judith Scott, untitled no date. Photographed by Leon A. Borensztein.
Reproduced by permission of the Creative Growth Center.

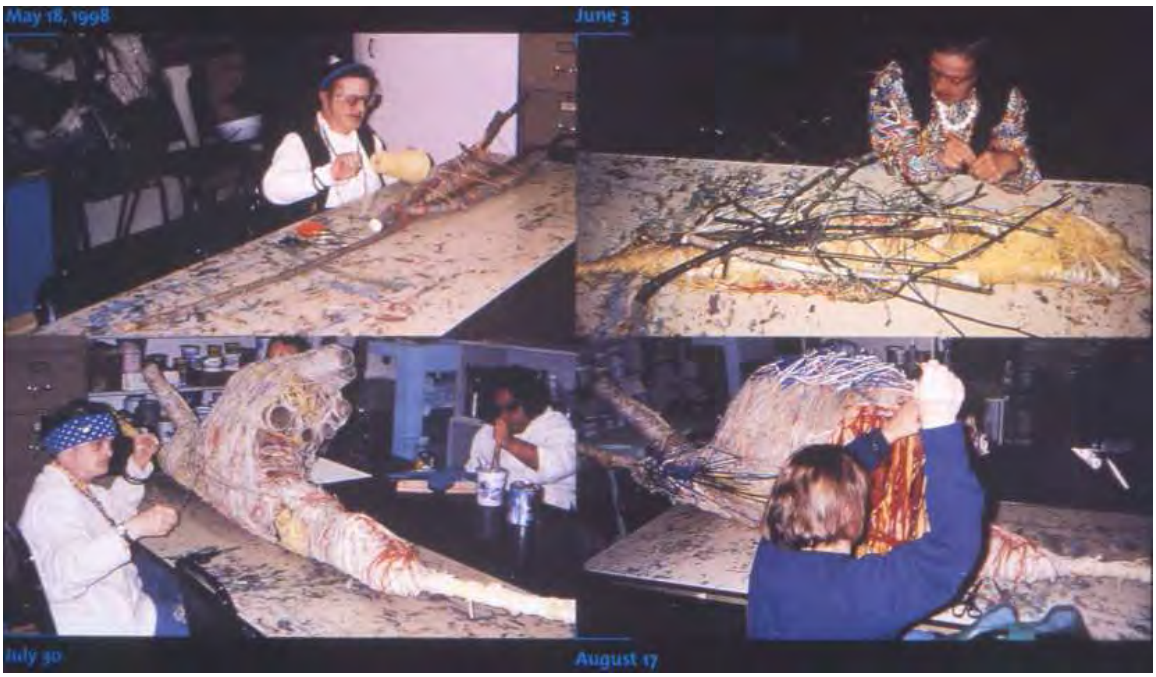

Figure 17. Judith Scott in action. Photographed by Leon A. Borensztein.
Reproduced by permission of the Creative Growth Center.

Figure 18. Judith Scott, untitled no date. Photographed by Leon A. Borensztein.
Reproduced by permission of the Creative Growth Center.

appreciation of art works, despite the fact that these appetites are constant themes in art. McCarthy challenges the classic doctrine of disinterestedness in aesthetic appreciation by revealing that it censors not only the body but also the disabled body. He refuses to prettify the human body, reproducing the logic of the nineteenth-century freakshow in the museum space with exhibits that stress bodily deformation. He also makes art out of food stuff, forcing beholders to experience his work with all their senses, not merely with their eyes. In short, his is a different embodiment of art, one expert in the presentation of differently-abled bodies. For example, *Hollywood Halloween* (figures 7 and 8) pictures the artist tearing a Halloween mask from his head, but because the mask has been stuffed with hamburger meat and ketchup in addition to the artist's head, the effect is a kind of self-defacement. The transformation of the artist from eerie able-bodiedness to the defacement of disability is the work's essential movement. The work reverses the apparently natural tendency to consider any form a corporeal transformation as driven by the desire for improvement or cure. In *Death Ship* (figure 9), a crazed ship captain hands out sailor hats to the audience, inviting them on a voyage in which the boundaries between body, food, and filth dissolve, as the captain smears his body with ketchup and food and installs a feeding tube for himself running from his anus to his mouth. *Mother Pig* (figure 10) similarly plays out a self-sculpture using processed meats and condiments in which McCarthy, masked as a pig, wraps strings of frankfurters smeared with ketchup around his penis. In these typical works, the smell of raw meat and pungent condiments permeate the air of the performance space, making it difficult for the audience to avoid reactions to foodstuff and flesh from its everyday life.

In addition to the challenge to disinterestedness perpetrated on the audience by McCarthy's stimulation of the appetite or gag reflex, as well as the assault on human beauty and form, is the representation of the mental condition of the artist. As the performances grow more intense and irrational, the audience begins to react to McCarthy as if he were mentally disabled. The video of *Class Fool* (1976), for example, shows the audience's reaction to his performance moving from amusement, to hesitation, to aversion. At some level, McCarthy's commitment to elemental behavior—smearing himself with food, repeating meaningless actions until they are ritualized, fondling himself in public—asks to be seen as idiocy, as if the core values of intelligence and genius were being systematically removed from the aesthetic in preference to stupidity and cognitive disorder. *Plaster Your Head and One Arm into a Wall* (figure 11), in which McCarthy inserts his head and left arm into wall cavities and then uses his right hand to close the holes with plaster, provides a more obvious example of these values. McCarthy changes how art is appreciated by overstimulating his audience with a different conception of art's corporeality. He takes the analogy

between art work and body to its limit, challenging ideas about how the human should be transformed and imagined. Moreover, the link between aesthetic appreciation and taste faces a redoubtable attack in his works because of their single-minded evocation of things that disgust.

The appreciation of the work of art is a topic well rehearsed in the history of aesthetics, but rarely is it considered from the vantage point of the disabled mind—no doubt because the spectacle of the mentally disabled person, rising with emotion before the shining work of art, disrupts the long-standing belief that pronouncements of taste depend on a form of human intelligence as autonomous and imaginative as the art object itself. Artistic production also seems to reflect a limited and well defined range of mental actions. Traditionally, we understand that art originates in genius, but genius is really at a minimum only the name for an intelligence large enough to plan and execute works of art—an intelligence that usually goes by the name of "intention." Defective or impaired intelligence cannot make art according to this rule. Mental disability represents an absolute rupture with the work of art. It marks the constitutive moment of abolition, according to Michel Foucault, that dissolves the essence of what art is.[9]

The work of Judith Scott challenges the absolute rupture between mental disability and the work of art and applies more critical pressure on intention as a standard for identifying artists. It is an extremely rare case, but it raises complex questions about aesthetics of great value to people with disabilities. A remarkably gifted fiber artist emerged in the late 1980s in California named Judith Scott. Her work is breathtaking in its originality and possesses disturbing power as sculptural form (figure 12). The sculptures invite comparisons with major artists of the twentieth century and allude to a striking variety of mundane and historical forms, from maps to the works of Alberto Giacometti, from Etruscan art and classical sculpture in its fragmentary state, to children's toys (figure 13). What makes the fiber sculptures even more staggering as works of art is the fact that Scott has no conception of the associations sparked by her objects and no knowledge of the history of art. In fact, she never visited a museum or read an art book, she did not know she was an "artist," and never intended to make "art" when she set to work, at least in the conventional understanding of these words. This is because Scott had Down syndrome (figure 14). She was also deaf, unable to speak, extremely uncommunicative, isolated, almost autistic. She was warehoused at age seven in the Ohio Asylum for the Education of Idiotic and Imbecilic Youth and spent the next thirty five years of her life as a ward of

[9] Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage, 1973), 286.

the state, until her twin sister rescued her and enrolled her in the Creative Growth Center, a California program in Oakland designed to involve intellectually disabled people with the visual arts. Almost immediately, she began to make fiber sculptures six hours a day, and she maintained this relentless pace for over ten years.

Although materials were made available to her, Scott behaved as if she were pilfering them, and each one of her sculptures takes the form of a cocoon at the center of which is secreted some acquired object (figure 15). The first hidden objects were sticks and cardboard spools used to store yarn and thread. Then she began to wrap other objects, an electric fan, for instance. Commentators have made the habit of associating her methods with acts of theft and a kind of criminal sensibility, acquired during thirty five years in a mental institution. The association between Scott's aesthetic method and criminal sensibility, however, takes it for granted that she was unable to distinguish between the Ohio Asylum for the Education of Idiotic and Imbecilic Youth and the Creative Growth Center in Oakland, between thirty five years spent in inactivity and neglect and her years involved intensively in the making of objects of beauty. The fact is that Scott's relation to her primary materials mimics modern art's dependence on found art—a dependence that has never been described as a criminal sensibility to my knowledge. Her method demonstrates the freedom both to make art from what she wants and to change the meaning of objects by inserting them into different contexts. One incident in particular illuminates her attitude toward her primary materials. During a period of construction in the art center, Scott was left unobserved one day for longer than usual. She emptied every paper-towel dispenser in the building and fabricated a beautiful monochromatic sculpture made entirely of knotted white paper towels (figure 16).

Scott's method always combines binding, knotting, sewing, and weaving different fiber materials around a solid core whose visibility is entirely occluded by the finished work of art. She builds the works patiently and carefully, as if in a process of concealment and discovery that destroys one object and gives birth to another mysterious thing (figure 17). A number of aesthetic principles are clearly at work in her method, even though she never articulated them. She strives to ensure the solidity and stability of each piece, and individual parts are bound tightly to a central core. Since she had no view to exhibit her work, no audience in mind, her sculptures do not distinguish between front and back. Consequently, her work projects a sense of independence and autonomy almost unparalleled in the sculptural medium (figure 18). Despite the variety of their shape, construction, and parts, then, Scott's sculptures consolidate all of their elements to give the impression of a single, unique body.

John MacGregor who has done the most extensive study to date of Scott poses succinctly the obvious critical questions raised by her work. "Does serious mental retardation," he asks, "invariably preclude the creation of true works of art? … Can art, in the fullest sense of the word, emerge when intellectual development is massively impaired from birth, and when normal intellectual and emotional maturation has failed to be attained?" (3). The problem, of course, is that Scott did not possess the intelligence associated with true artists by the tradition of art history. What kind of changes in the conception of art would be necessary to include her in this history?

Despite the many attacks launched by modern artists, genius remains the unspecified platform on which almost every judgment in art criticism is based, whether about artistic technique, invention, or subversiveness. In fact, Thomas Crow claims that the campaign against autonomy and creativity in modern art gives rise to a cult of the genius more robust than any conceived during the Romantic period.[10] We still assume that creativity is an expression of inspiration and autonomy, just as we assume that aesthetic technique is a form of brilliance always at the artist's disposal. Intelligence, however, is fraught with difficulties as a measure of aesthetic quality, and intention in particular has long been condemned as an obsolete tool for interpreting works of art.[11] Artists do not control—nor should they—the meaning of their works, and intentions are doubtful as a standard of interpretation because they are variable, often forgotten, improperly executed, inscrutable to other people, and marred by accidents in aesthetic production. If intention has uncertain value for interpretation, why should it be used to determine whether an action or object is a work of art?

Disability aesthetics prizes physical and mental difference as a significant value in itself. It does not embrace an aesthetic taste that defines harmony, bodily integrity, and health as standards of beauty. Nor does it support the aversion to disability required by traditional conceptions of human or social perfection. Rather, it drives forward the appreciation of disability found throughout modern and avant-garde art by raising an objection to aesthetic standards and tastes that exclude people with disabilities. The idea of disability aesthetics affirms that disability operates both as a critical framework for questioning aesthetic presuppositions in the history of art and as a value in its own right important to

[10] The growth rather than decline of heroic biography supporting the value of art is a constant theme in Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

[11] The path-breaking rejection of intention as a standard of interpretation is W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," in W. K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), 3-18.

future conceptions of what art is.

TOBIN SIEBERS is the V. L. Parrington Collegiate Professor of Literary and Cultural Criticism at the University of Michigan. He has been selected for fellowships by the Michigan Society of Fellows, the Guggenheim Foundation, the Mellon Foundation, and the Institute for the Humanities. In 1999 he was nominated for a Pushcart Prize for "My Withered Limb," an account of growing up with polio. His principal contributions to literary and cultural criticism have been in ethics.

Siebers, Tobin. "Disability Aesthetics." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 7 no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2006): 63-73.
PURL: http://www.jcrt.org/archives/07.2/siebers.pdf