Common Humanity and Shared Destinies
Looking at the Disability Arts Movement from an Anthropological Perspective

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ABSTRACT: This article will bring together two strands of anthropological theories on art and artefacts, the disability arts movement and the phenomenological approach to the study of material things. All three of these different perspectives have one thing in common: they seek to understand entities – be they human or nonhuman – as defined by their agency and their intentionality. Looking at the disability arts movement, I will examine how the anthropology of art and agency, following Alfred Gell’s theorem, is indeed the ‘mobilisation of aesthetic principles in the course of social interaction’, as Gell argued in Art and Agency. Art, thus, should be studied as a space in which agency, intention, causation, result and transformation are enacted and imagined. This has a striking resonance with debates within the disability arts movement, which suggests an affirmative model of disability and impairment, and in which art is seen as a tool to affirm, celebrate and transform rather than a way of expressing pain and sorrow. I will use case studies of Tanya Raabe-Webber’s work and of artistic representations of the wheelchair in order to further explore these striking similarities and their potential to redefine the role of art in imagining the relationship between technology and personhood. I will finish by looking at Martin Heidegger’s conceptualisation of the intentionality of things, as opposed to objects, and will apply this to some artwork rooted in the disability arts movement.

KEYWORDS: affirmative model of disability, art and agency, disability arts movement, en-wheelment, impairment, phenomenology of art, United Kingdom.

Introduction

Alfred Gell’s suggestions to study art from an anthropological perspective have been met in the academic world of anthropology and in the history of art likewise with either welcoming astonishment or rejection (Layton 2003; Osborne and Tanner 2007). These reactions show that Gell’s call for a new understanding of art objects and their relationships to the environment in which they are produced was quite an innovative move. Similarly controversial was Martin Heidegger’s approach to art, sculpture and space (Mitchell 2010). Both theoretical approaches deal with how materiality, namely the art object, and their environment, be it human or not, interact.

In this article, I try to apply Gell’s anthropological theory of art and Heidegger’s ideas on sculpture to the British disability arts movement and I will argue that this allows us to understand aspects that we would otherwise miss. The disability arts movement in the United Kingdom is very lively and influential and has even been the source of an influential theoretical paper (Swain and French 2000) that transcended the divide between the medical and the social model of disability, a hotly contested divide within the disability movement in the U.K. (see Shakespeare 2014; Thomas 2007). The landscape of the disability arts movement in the U.K. is vast and encompasses several modes of artistic expression, including performance artists such as Mat Fraser¹ and the Candoco Dance...
Company, founded in 1991 by Celeste Dandeker-Arnold. The disability arts movement is indeed a wide field but for the sake of my argument, I concentrate on the visual arts, and here in particular to painting to which Gell’s art theory is also more applicable. In order to make my argument clearer, I want to focus on the paintings of Tanya Raabe-Webber, and here especially on a series of paintings called ‘Revealing Culture: Head On’. This is a work of art and a body of research at the same time, because Raabe-Webber explores the notions of identity, the nude, and disability culture. Interviews with her sitters were published together with the catalogue. I take this artwork as an anthropological case study to explore the validity of Alfred Gell’s theoretical approach. I then also look at another art theory that is also rooted in the material world, that of the German phenomenologist Martin Heidegger, and apply it to the work of the sculptor Tony Heaton. Similar to Gell, Heidegger argues that we can make a distinction between a thing and an entity; the thing entraps us, it captures us, it touches us. By being close to us, the thing has the power suddenly to reveal its essence, and thus its meaning in the world and to the onlooker (Mitchell 2010).

**The Anthropology of Art**

Looking at art from an anthropological and social science perspective, one can take several points of departure. Before discussing approaches to understand the disability arts movement in the United Kingdom from an anthropological perspective, I want to give a brief outline of the different approaches that most anthropologists take.

Social and cultural anthropologists study art and its modes of production. From this perspective, art is seen as being part of the religion of the culture that is studied, or of the political situation of the area, or of modes of production, be it agricultural or industrial, and of commerce (Plattner 2003: 15). Any artistic expression is thus another aspect of a complex social world. Art is thus not seen as the production of an aesthetic artefact, nor is the artist imbued with a superhuman set of skills, as is the case in most post-Renaissance European understandings of art. Indeed, these perspectives on art that we still cultivate and which developed in Renaissance Italy still have repercussions in the current European perspective on how art is seen and what is defined as art: a painting elevates the human experience and the artist is seen as possessing skills that go beyond any other person’s skill set. Should an anthropological approach to art follow this route? Or, are anthropologists, as Harold Becker argues in his sociological argument on how to study art, not equipped to make judgements on aesthetics? I would like to argue alongside Becker, and agree that the role of social scientists is to understand the social organisation of art (Becker 1982). If anthropologists enter the debate on what is aesthetically pleasing, or what should be defined as art, important aspects of the production of art and how people relate through art to each other are lost. Becker argues that questions such as who gets to produce art, who exhibits their art and who sells their art in which place are important for this aspect of research into art (ibid.). However, I would add, it is essentially also a question of who gets to define what art is. A prime example of this power of definition, for example, is the appreciation of the Young British Artists whose work was given the status of art simply by the fact that one powerful and rich person bought most of their work. Had this person acted otherwise, contemporary British art would be defined in a different way, one might argue.

This example leads me to another approach to studying art which emerged in the 1990s when anthropological research started to focus on who buys and who sells art. The focus thus shifted to markets of art (Plattner 2003: 17). Plattner explicitly mentions the research of Richard Anderson, who studies American art in mundane everyday objects rather than the elite high-art that hangs in the homes of rich families or, increasingly, bank hallways (Anderson 2000, quoted in Plattner 2003: 17).

Gell’s approach opened up completely different pathways for the anthropological study of visual arts. Gell’s approach to understanding art has its roots in the anthropology of the material world, but also in an anthropological theory of mind, so to speak (Osborne and Tanner 2007). His core thesis was that objects have an agency that goes beyond the intention of the person who produced the artefact. Moreover, the object of art has the agency to draw the one who looks at it into its trap; it conveys a certain emotion, a certain embodied sensation and thus communicates a bodily and cognitive sensation that goes beyond a mere interpretation of the work of art. This is where the anthropological theory of mind is to be seen. Gell rejects the semiotic approach to art (Layton 2003). Artefacts do not have a meaning per se, instead art is a ‘system of action intended to change the world, rather than encode symbolic propositions about it’ (Gell, quoted in Osborne and Tanner 2007: 2).

Following the semiotics of George Sanders Peirce, icon, index and symbol form the triad of semiotic analysis (Peirce 1991). Gell, however, uses only the
understanding why a painting is not just a depiction. A work of art offers us a different perspective towards the origin of a causal event, independent of its physical status. Agency can be attributed to persons and things which through an ‘act of mind or will or intention’ initiate causal sequences (Gell 1998: 16). The art object is an index; it is an extension of its maker, and it stands in for the maker. It has social effect by virtue of the intentions of the maker and by being enmeshed in social relationships (Layton 2003). Material objects thus mediate responses, interferences and interpretations. They stand in a relationship with the prototypes, artists and recipients. Gell defines a prototype as object or a person that the index stands in for mimetically or non-mimetically, visually or non-visually. A recipient is someone who is affected by the index, and an artist is a person who is the immediate cause or the author of the existence and the properties of the index (Gell 1998).

These are somewhat idiosyncratic definitions of the process of creating and experiencing art. What makes Gell’s propositions so interesting for my argument is his analysis of why good art can create the feeling of ‘awe’. Dutch art historian Caroline van Eck (2010) has applied Gell’s proposition for a new anthropology of art and developed the concept of ‘living presence response’ which she describes as an awareness that inanimate objects appear as living beings. At first glance, this concept resembles Sigmund Freud’s definition of the uncanny (Freud 1919), but Gell’s definition leans towards a more novel interpretation of phenomenology that suggests that objects and spaces create an atmosphere that then creates a bodily sensation. This bodily felt sensation is subsequently turned into an emotion (Schmitz 2009). With art, this emotion is awe. Yet, as Gell suggests, awe draws us in. It makes us become part of the work of art and it encompasses us. I thus suggest that using Gell’s approach to art offers us a different perspective towards understanding why a painting is not just a depiction of an object or a person. A painting affects us because it draws us into its nexus through the sensation it provokes and through the appeal to the unconscious, awe-inspiring reaction that it evokes in us. If a work of art is reduced to conveying a meaning and thus can be interpreted, it misses this aspect of art. If a work of art is reduced to its aesthetic properties, it also misses this point. Having discussed this perspective, let us now have a look at the affirmative model of disability, a model of disability which took some of its clues from the disability arts movement.

The Affirmative Model of Disability and Art and Anthropology

At the beginning of the new millennium, John Swain and Sally French published a paper in the journal Disability and Society, in which the two authors suggested that neither the medical model nor the social model of disability would solve any debate on how disability should be defined (Swain and French 2000). Rather, they suggested, the only way to conceptualise disability was the affirmative model of disability. The affirmative model of disability is the only way of talking about disability which does not start out with a presumption that disability is problematic and either has to be individualised, as in the medical model, or seen as a social construction, as in the social model of disability. The affirmative model of disability takes cues from citizenship rights movements and argues that disabled people are proud, angry and strong. The pinnacle of the expression of being proud, angry and strong can be found in the disability arts movement. Swain and French suggest that by defining people by what they produce and not by their bodily appearance, the divide between disabled and non-disabled could be bridged (ibid.: 569).

While the shortcomings and the criticism of the medical model and the social model are well known within academic circles (see Thomas 2007 for an in-depth discussion), upholding this division in everyday life is even more arbitrary. Identities in everyday life are more common and, as scholars in gender studies argue, defined by intersectionality (Springer et al. 2011). This means that a person, whether they are as disabled or not, can be discriminated against because of their class, their gender, their sexual orientation and their religious beliefs. Likewise, many people who are not classified as disabled have impairments but would not define themselves as disabled. On a more positive note, everybody who is part of a given culture can be defined by these overlapping identi-
ties, and takes on these identities in different situations. I would also concur with Thomas (2007) that a better term to talk about the experience of disability is ‘impairment’ because it is more descriptive. Disability means a state of being in which a person is defined by the health system as in need of assistance from someone else and/or entitled to benefits. The term thus is more about civil rights than about the experience of the person. As Thomas writes, chronic illness and disability are categories of impairment. I would also prefer to take this perspective because I belong to the part of scholars who see disability as a social construct rather than a social reality. Debates on intersectionality (Springer et al. 2011) have shown quite clearly that the term disability is more a tool of a powerful discourse rather than an adequate description of a person’s state of being. Swain and French’s argument is that the medical model and the social model are both starting with the assumption that being disabled is a personal tragedy which must be rectified or dealt with. They argue that whilst wheelchair users might have become used to the fact that they cannot enter a building by using steps, a non-disabled person can be quite upset and challenged when a wheelchair user is ‘proud to be the person he or she is’ (Swain and French 2000: 570). Thus, Swain and French’s suggestion is that disabled persons challenge the social order by rejecting the tragedy model, and even more so by actually being proud of who they are and what they do. They point to the all-pervasive ideology that disability is a tragedy and that the ‘normals’ think that disabled people want to be like them, but in reality this is hardly ever the case because a lot of disabled people feel that their disability is a major part of their identity (Watson 2002). Neither taking for granted that disability equals personal tragedy, nor entering the dividing debate between social constructionism and social realism, Swain and French impel us to go beyond these debates and to steer the debate towards a positive individual identity. This positive disability identity can mean that disabled people do not have to conform to social stereotypes and conventional ways of planning a life, such as getting married and having children, and thus are free to develop their own ways of forming relationships and leading fulfilling lives. Being part of a disability rights group can be exciting because of the fact the being part of a ‘social movement which is bringing about tangible change’ can be life-changing (Swain and French 2000: 577). Disability rights groups can also facilitate the chance to express frustration and anger collectively. Swain and French cite research by Tom Shakespeare which states that ‘drama, cabaret, writing and visual arts have been harnessed to challenge negative images, and build a sense of unity’ (Shakespeare 1996: 186).

The important argument that I take from Swain and French is that art allows for the expression and simultaneously the creation of ‘images of strength and pride, the antithesis of dependency and helplessness’ (Swain and French 2000: 578). They argue that the disability arts movement allows disabled people to create and demand the right way to be, that is ‘equal but different’ (Swain and French 2000: 578). The disability arts movement manages to contribute to the affirmative model of disability, a model that celebrates difference and the positive experiences of being disabled. Having said that, I would like to argue there should be a place for the celebration of difference in debates on models of disability, or to use a better phrase, physical impairment (see Shakespeare 2014). I concur with Carol Thomas when she points out that the ‘effects of impairment and disablement are thoroughly intermeshed with the social conditions that bring them into being and give them meaning. The materiality of the body is in a dynamic interrelationship with the social and cultural context in which it is lived’ (Thomas 2007: 137). Experiencing physical and mental pain is often an effect of impairment, if one defines pain from the phenomenological perspective as a force that unmakes and makes the world at the same time (Scarry 1985). Pain is often a reaction to something that is in the way, something that does not allow the existence of two or more entities at the same time. In the human experience, finding an obstacle in one’s way, be it a wheelchair or an unpleasant thought, often leads to painful sensations that then result in cultural expressed emotions. I sometimes wonder if the experience of pain should also be part of celebrating impaired life, be it in disability or chronic illness. These emotions are not only experienced by disabled people and people with a chronic disorder and should thus not be seen as the defining characteristic of the experience of living with a disability; however, one can also not deny that impairment and chronic illness often come with the experience of pain. This argument should not lead us to the path of the medical model of disability that focusses on the individual tragic model rather than the social model, which I suggest defines the disabling material world as the culprit in the causation of pain.

In what follows, I would like to discuss two approaches to art that are not about representation of emotions and sensations. This is firstly Alfred Gell’s ideas on art and agency (1998) and secondly Martin Heidegger’s philosophical approaches regarding the
pheno
omenology of art. I want to apply both of these
approaches to what art, and things that are a part of
art, in Heidegger’s definition, can do in the disability
arts movement. This allows us to look at disability art
not just as a therapeutic activity for people who suffer,
but as a powerful tool of communication for describ-
ing the human condition. A phenomenological per-
spective starts from the personal, lived experience of
the person, regardless of whether or not they are able-
bodied or disabled (A. Frank 1995; G. Frank 1988). In
the following paragraphs I am pursuing this line of
argument because, from my perspective, it renders a
distinction between the medical, social and even the
affirmative model of disability obsolete. Phenomenol-
ogy sees the human being as ‘intentionally lived rela-
tion, engaged in and engaging social and physical
contexts’ (Papadimitriou 2008: 693).

The Disability Arts Movement

Art and disability has had a long and productive re-
lationship in the United Kingdom and also in Ger-
many, be it the visual arts or the performing arts. In
Germany, artists’ groups such as Die Schlumper have
been creative since 1984. Die Schlumper, who take
their name from a street called ‘Beim Schlump’, de-
scribe themselves as a group of ‘so-called mentally
handicapped people who felt the urge to paint’. The
Schlumpers have done well for themselves: the Ger-
man ministry of Labour, Health and Social Welfare
and the city of Hamburg sponsor their work so that
twenty-two members of the group have the chance to
pursue their work on a full-time professional basis.
Similarly, a colony of artists at the hospital for psychi-
atriy and neurology at Gugging near Vienna has con-
tributed significantly to the development of Art Brut
in Austria. Art Brut in the way it is used in German
however has a different meaning from the English
concept; in English it would be referred to as ‘outsider
art’. It defines an art form that is not following the tra-
ditional and/or contemporary rules of aesthetics.
These developments were a completely different take
on the outdated role of people with a disability to work
in ‘sheltered workshops’ or ‘Behindertenwerk-
statt’, namely places in which people with a disability
worked for low wages to produce crafts. These places
often did not allow people with disabilities to engage
with the world of business and risk and made them
even more outsiders.

The disability arts online movement has created a
home for itself in the real world and especially in the
virtual world. Just like other citizenship rights move-
ment, the disability arts movement has benefited
from the opportunities that social media and an
online presence provide. In the U.K., the website
http://www.disabilityartsonline.org.uk/ functions as
a hub that brings disabled artists together. One of the
features of the website also addresses the question
why disability and art has become such a major
mainstay of the current debate on the affirmative
model of disability.

It is possible to apply this theoretical approach to
art that I discussed earlier by assessing the work of
Tanya Raabe-Webber, a prolific artist whose work has
been exhibited in many British mainstream muse-
ums. Raabe-Webber makes us aware of new social
media and showcases her work on her own website.
Raabe-Webber’s most remarkable work is called ‘Re-
vealing Culture: Head On’. Raabe-Webber has pro-
duced full-body portraits of several British disabled
public figures, some of them in the nude. By doing
so, she has not only challenged ideas of identity, self-
hood and beauty, but also confirmed that the nude in
Western art is actually a ‘dressed’ naked body. This
means that we always already perceive a naked body
in its cultural imprint. This is probably more so the
case with disabled people. The way in which Raabe-
Webber produced her portraits can also be analysed
with Gell’s suggestion on how art is part of a nexus:
the act of producing the portraits was open to every-
body and done in public, thus ‘luring’ the public to
take part in the work in progress, as Marcus Dickey
Horley, the curator of the Access Projects for the Tate
Modern, put it. Raabe-Webber also interviewed and
recorded her sitters whilst she was painting them and
called these interviews ‘Revealing the Untold’. Seen
as a Gesamtkunstwerk, Raabe-Webber’s work invites
us to ‘discover the untold stories of Disability Cul-
ture’, as she puts it on her homepage. If we go back
to the idea that art has the power to elicit a ‘living
presences response’ which makes viewers of art react
to the work as if they were living beings, or even per-
sons, we can also claim that the work of art enters into
a relationship with the viewer and elicits love, hate,
desire or fear.

Raabe-Webber’s full-body portraits and her inter-
active way of producing art by letting the sitters com-
ment stimulates two questions: what are the tech-
niques of entrapment that she uses? And how do
the sitters perceive the process of being turned into a
work of art? Raabe-Webber’s paintings, even though
they portray disabled people, are not about disability.
As Garry Robson, one of the commentators to Raabe-
Webber’s report on ‘Revealing Culture: Head On’,
notes, her portraits: ‘have a universal appeal, even
though they are strikingly different. They have an appeal because they speak to us ultimately of our common humanity and shared destiny’ (Raabe-Webber 2012: 11). Moreover, one of the sitters, Sir Bert Massie CBE, commented on the experience of ‘sitting’ in an open space, in which he could be talked to and painted by members of the public who came to observe, in the following way:

I was interested in the results: is that me? Do I approve? On what basis should I judge? Best not to judge but to let be. Then the public arrived: some to talk and stay out of the cold, others to draw – and what interesting pictures resulted. All the pictures were clearly me, but all very different. Maybe there are lots of me’s! What I did find surprising was that I would happily have bought some of the pictures because they presented me in a way that I have not seen before. Some drawings were basic but others displayed great skill and insight. Some stressed the wheelchair but most did not. Maybe the disabled model is becoming just the model. That’s the power of art. (Raabe-Webber 2012: 43)

In the Revealing Culture: Head On project, Raabe-Webber also included three nude portraits, amongst them a portrait of consultant, trainer and performer Michèle Taylor. In the painting, she is naked apart from wearing her glasses and she is portrayed as meeting the gaze of the onlooker – she thus directly engages the onlooker. Michèle Taylor’s comments that this was something rather unusual to do because it was the first time that she would allow other people than her partner to view her nude body for ‘nothing other than aesthetic appreciation’ (Raabe-Webber 2012: 47). She reports that the experience of sitting and being viewed through someone else’s eyes made her aware that she did not have to hide, pretend or feel ashamed but rather to be invited to show, to be, to celebrate. It’s not often that we get the chance to do that – as women let alone as disabled women. It was a rare moment of joined-upness for me – body, emotions, intellect all congruent, all out there, all accepted and welcomed. That was empowering. (Raabe-Webber 2012: 47)

Raabe-Webber confirms the argument made on Swain and French’s paper, namely that art is affirmative and celebratory. It is also noticeable that all the selected portraits show the subject directly engaging with the gaze of the onlooker. Such artwork is important for an affirmative model of disability, one with a defined notion of agency: Gell’s agency through technical virtuosity, as expressed through Raabe-Webber’s engagement of the onlooker by the agency given to the subjects. This thesis is not just restricted to painting. It can also be found in the three dimensions of the sculpture. In the last part of this essay, I therefore want to focus on the work of disabled sculptor, Tony Heaton, who frequently uses his wheelchair and himself in his performances. Sculpture is different from painting because it takes up a space in the world; it is three-dimensional, as opposed to painting, which, of course only in the strict sense, is two-dimensional.

At the start of this article I raised the possibility of using Heidegger’s phenomenology to understand sculpture. If we want to understand Tony Heaton’s work, I would like to argue that we cannot just start with an analysis of his sculptures. Heidegger’s theory can also be used to understand how persons who use a wheelchair develop a sense of embodiment with their wheelchair, as Christina Papadimitriou has shown in her work on the ‘en-wheelment process’ (2008). Papadimitriou stresses that en-wheelment is a creative, dynamic process whereby ‘people evaluate and negotiate their abilities, interests, desires, competencies and possibilities in life whenever it is necessary, as it becomes relevant to them’ (2008: 699). I can of course not make any claims on how Tony Seaton has embodied his wheelchair or not, but I would like to take Papadimitriou’s claim one step further by adding another level of engagement with wheelchairs, embodiment and identity: the wheelchair is turned into a work of art, or, indeed, a sculpture, as the disabled artist Tony Heaton has done. Heaton is well known, amongst other artwork, for his sculptures in the series ‘Great Britain in a Wheelchair’. In these sculptures, Heaton uses wheelchairs to fill in the graphically recognisable space of Great Britain. On his website, Tony published the reaction of one of the onlookers to this sculpture:

First seeing it, in the ‘Unleashed’ exhibition earlier this year, I found that initially it just looked like a lot of bits of old wheelchairs. As with those 3D prints, it took a while to adjust perceptually. Then suddenly it sprang into place – a complete, startlingly real map of Great Britain. A delightful game, it forms a wonderful repudiation of the value judgment (‘This is for some tragic bastard’, in Tony’s words) implicit in the wheelchairs.

Heaton’s artistic skill allows us to see Great Britain from a different perspective: not only does it show how Great Britain is perceived for someone in a wheelchair, but though the skill and its aesthetic value it entrap us. It allows us, as the observer quoted above states, to repudiate the value judgement that is implicit in wheelchairs. Here again we find the link to Gell’s understanding of skill and entrapment. However, it also reminds me of Martin Heidegger’s obser-
vation that being close to an object turns the object into a thing, a thing that is close to us (1969). The thing, in our case Tony Heaton’s sculpture, reveals its essence to us, and by doing so it makes us intuitively understand what we already knew. The thing thus binds people who share the same cultural and social background by using this shared knowledge.

Conclusion: The Way Forward

In conclusion, I have tried to show that the disability arts movements, and especially some of its most famous artists, such as Tanya Raabe-Webber and Tony Heaton, are contributing to formulating a new debate on how to conceptualise disability and impairment as part of the human condition. My aim is aligned with the affirmative model of disability that I discussed at the start of this essay: disability, and ultimately I would like to argue, impairment as defined by Carol Thomas – being on a continuum scale of illness and disability. Swain and French (2000) argue that the disability arts movement allows us to celebrate disability. It emphasises the pride that disabled people feel, a pride that is sometimes lacking because of the still prevailing social stigma. Pride is essential for a citizenship rights movement to flourish and keep its momentum going. I very much support Swain and French’s argument, but I would also like to argue that the disability arts movement as espoused by Tanya Raabe-Webber and Tony Heaton engages and embraces impairment as part of the human condition and communicates this effectively through the work of art. This, ultimately, goes far beyond medical, social or affirmative models.

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Notes

1. www.matfraser.co.uk
2. www.cadoco.co.uk
3. www.hum.leiden.edu/research/artandagency/subprojects/deel-proej-ekc.html
4. See www.schlumper.de
5. www.gugging.at
7. ibid.
8. http://www.tonyheaton.co.uk/

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Watson, N. (2002), “‘Well, I Know This Is Going to Sound Very Strange to You, But I Don’t See Myself as a Disabled Person’: Identity and Disability’, *Disability and Society* 17, no. 5: 507–27.